

Tear In My Heart

by amirmitchell

Category: Girl Meets World

Genre: Angst, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Lucas F., Maya H., Missy B.

Pairings: Maya H./Lucas F.

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-04-09 03:16:28

Updated: 2016-04-09 03:16:28

Packaged: 2016-04-27 21:30:18

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 44,826

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: childhood au where maya can't catch a break and lucas just wants the world for his best friend /trigger warnings for mentions of suicide/death, suicidal and destructive thoughts, destructive behavior, and emotional abuse

Tear In My Heart

**can u believe i just wrote a fucking novel anyways epilogue is in the works hmu on tumblr (missysbradford) and pls take caution to the trigger warnings**

* * *

><p>5th Grade**_

You're sitting on a bench when he approaches you and you think that he doesn't know that you've seen him in the years leading but you have. He's wearing faded jeans and a striped shirt with his light hair hidden under a worn out baseball cap and you think to yourself that for an outfit so simple he looks very good. You used to watch him at recess and from your desk you could see him through the windows in the doors across the hall and that had been going on until he finally got put into the challenge class with you during your fifth grade year. His name is Lucas and he is the tallest one in your grade. He is missing a top tooth which makes you giggle because it makes his smile seem lopsided, and you talked to him once in the classroom when he asked you how his picture looked and once more in the cafeteria when he suggested that you get yogurt that comes with a granola bar instead of buying one for extra and not eating whatever meal you get, but that was it and you hadn't said another word to him until today when he sat beside you while you were reading Matilda and piped out a hello.

"Hello," you say awkwardly because you'd never really been good with

friends or classmates. You don't do well with others and you dread group assignments, though having to make a poster on the Egyptians with Lucas doesn't seem that terrible at that second.

"Do you love me?" He speaks his words without hesitation, something making his eyes seem lighter as your face scrunches in confusion. _Love?_ you ask yourself, _Do I love him?_ You want to think no, and you know it is no, but a tiny part of you wants to say yes because he has freckles that you can count and you had never really wanted a new friend before seeing him and now you do.

"No. I hardly know you." You decide to answer truthfully before you go back to your book. _Honesty is the best policy_, you think before you grimace at the rhyme spoken by your school librarian when you see him once a week. "Wellâ€¦" Lucas speaks again, shuffling for a second before he pulls a crisp ten dollar bill from his pocket. He makes a scene out of unfolding it and you try to hold back a smile but the only way to describe it is dorky and cute and that only makes you want to grin more. He sets it down in the tiny gap between you and slides it over, a smirk on his lips as he crushes it into the side of your dress. "Do you love me now?"

You pick up the money and you laugh a little, turning back to him. "For only ten dollars? Not even close," you tease and he laughs and you can't help but think that his laugh sounds like angels. He rolls his eyes and he completely turns his body before he talks again. "I think that ten dollars is more than enough," he starts, "but if you're really that pricey, I have a Snickers in my lunchbox with your name written all over it." You tell him that it's tempting and he says that after recess he'll get it for you and you guys can split it during reading groups. You agree before he turns again and swings his legs.

"My older cousin told me that this is...well...'how you get the ladies'," he explains, lowering his voice while his fingers hung in the air to represent quotes. "I told him I needed help because there was this girl in my class I wanted to talk to that I always see sitting alone, and, it was you, obviously, and so he told me that this always works on his lady friends and _all_ the lady friends of Zeta Omega Mu and if I wanted a lady friend that I should use this method and I do want a lady friend- You- So if you'd want to be my lady friend that'd be super cool and really you should because he said that it always works."

He's rambling and you're laughing because he's talking so much he's almost out of breath and you'd really like to be his lady friend, whatever that means, so you tell him that and suddenly his face is red and he looks like all the air dragged out of him while he was babbling on was just pumped back into his lungs.

"Lucas Friar!" He announces before shoving his hand towards you.

You chuckle again and shake it. "Maya Hart."

.

You are friends with Maya for five weeks and four days exactly when you decide that enough time has passed to invite her for a sleepover. You're nervous because the last time you had a sleepover it was with Isaiah and he had confessed to you that he didn't really like his

name because it was too formal but his parents won't let him use nicknames so when he went home afterwards and told his mama that you had helped him think of Zay as a nickname, your parents got a phone call explaining that Isaiah was no longer allowed to play at your house- but you beg and beg until your mom caves because Maya always looks so lonely by herself and you've been her only friend for five weeks and four days and so she _has _to come sleepover.

Thankfully Maya accepts, too, and she texts her mother on her phone that she has (you find out that her mother is gone for work a lot and she has to have some way to get in touch) and tells you that she can come over on Friday after school and stay through Saturday evening.

When you tell your parents (who said it was fine as long as her mom didn't mind you being a boy), your dad tells you that you guys can set up a blanket fort in your room and your mom makes him promise to help clean it up before telling you to ask Maya what she likes to eat so she can make something good for dinner. You call Maya right away and she tells you that she likes mac and cheese and you smile because you like mac and cheese, too, and your mom makes the best mac and cheese in the universe.

Friday comes quickly which isn't really a shock because it was only a two day wait, but still, it was like you blinked and suddenly you see Maya walking towards your classroom with two backpacks instead of one. "Morning, Maya Papaya!" you greet.

You started calling her Maya Papaya the week before and she has yet to tell you not to so you're trying to fit it in as much as possible.

"Good morning, Huckleberry," she teases sarcastically. Your cheeks burn and you're not entirely sure why but you choose to ignore it and grab her extra backpack.

"My dad says that he and my mom will pick us up today because he wants to make sure you're comfortable with both of them and they both spend close to an equal amount of time with you. It's weird but I've learned to just kind of roll with it."

"Um, alright." She's wearing a dress again and it's shorter than the one she wore two days earlier and it is a dark blue that makes her skin seem very light. She told you weeks ago that she almost always wears dresses and skirts because her mother thinks that one's appearance is vital and her children will be dressed properly if it was the only thing she could control. You're not complaining because Maya always looks so nice and you find yourself appreciating that a lot. You appreciate her dresses and her blue eyes and the way her hair is always in soft curls that she lets you play with. You often think to yourself how lucky you are that the prettiest girl in your entire school is friends with a dork like you.

"Who's picking up Will today?" you ask as she leads you towards her assigned coat hook. She talks about her younger brother a lot, seeing as she's constantly alone with him. "Is your mom going to be home this weekend?" You know her mom normally works, weekends especially, and you wonder if she's missing out on family time for your sleepover. You hope she isn't.

"My mother hired a nanny for the weekend. She watches Will if I'm sick or if I have a lesson or anything really." You let out a sigh of relief as she gathers her supplies for the school day. "I just need to walk to his classroom door when the bell rings and walk him to the office to meet her before we leave."

"Alright, sounds good." You grin right as your teacher begins to announce that it's time to take your seats.

You spend the day watching Maya as she works. You don't usually do that, you swear, but you find that you're especially excited and you absolutely can't wait for Maya to get to your house and meet your mom and your dad and see your room and help you feed your fish. You waste the entire morning just imagining all the things you guys will do and before you know it it's lunch and she's walking towards you. You eat together and you play four square at recess and after recess you spend reading group and gym arguing about your personal preferences of chocolate and vanilla pudding.

(You like vanilla, but she likes chocolate, so you're going to tell your mom to buy the combo pack next time you're at the store.)

When the bell rings you barely get your backpack on before Maya is out the door with both of hers and she's rushing to make it to the first grade classrooms on the other side of the school. You chase her and finally catch up turning the corner. "Hey! Maya Papaya! Wait!" You reach her side and your arms are soon looped together before you notice that she's stopped and is waiting for her brother's class to let out. "Sorry," she says with an apologetic smile. "I need to get here before he does or he starts to kind of freak out. He gets worried."

You immediately accept her apology and you realize that Maya is a very sweet sister. Will is lucky to have her.

His class is the last one out and his teacher is a plump redheaded lady that you remember seeing when you were a first grader yourself. She taught across the hall from you and her classroom had tadpoles in it and one time your teacher chose you to go help feed them because you were especially curious. You fed them and you remember that Isaiah was in that class and so was Billy and you sat with them for your snack that day.

You're lost in your memory until you hear a tiny voice call out, "Sissy! You'll never guess what Mrs. Phelps let me do today!"

Will reminds you of Thumper from Bambi because of the way he's speeding to hug Maya and bouncing around as he speaks. He is missing several teeth and he really likes to sing punk bands that Maya likes to listen to and he is wearing a bowtie which is very fancy for a little kid, you think.

"You got me," she admits, "What did you do?" Your eyes glance but you're suddenly not staring at your classmate; you're staring at someone much older. You look and you see a very responsible young woman talking excitedly to her brother as she takes his backpack and glances through his things. She's asking about his day and you'd never really seen Maya and Will together until now. You'd never seen Maya act so grown up, either. She's frowning at the half eaten bag of sliced apples and telling him that he needs to finish his snack, and

you really hope he's not sick because your dad gets that look on his face when your mom doesn't eat all of her food sometimes because she needs to eat with her medicine or her stomach gets upset.

You walk quietly beside the pair as you guys approach the main office and Maya hands off Will's backpack to a tall lady in a bright green sweater. "He only ate some of his snack, so make sure he eats something when you get home before his homework." You wonder if she's trying to sound grown up or if it's just coming to her. Your mother told you once of some children that can't be children as long as they need to be because of their circumstances. Maya deserves to be a child as long as possible so you hope that it isn't that case with her.

"You and Will seem really close," you tell her as you lead her towards your mom's car. You've again taken up the responsibility of her extra backpack and it causes awkward shifts to balance two bags instead of one. She made it seem so easy that you start to get a bit embarrassed.

"Yeah," she says with a shrug, "I help with him a lot because my mom works, so it's just kind of how it is. I wouldn't change it. He's not so bad once you're used to him."

When you approach your ride, your mom is already out and grabbing bags before scooping you up in a hug. You laugh and push her off. "Hi, mama! This is Maya."

"I gathered that from how much you talk about her," she says, reaching out her hand to shake Maya's. She shakes it politely and you don't remember seeing Maya this formal ever and it's a little weird. Your cheeks are still kind of burning from your mom revealing that you talk about her so you rush into the back seat of the car and partially climb through the middle of the front seats to lean towards your dad in the driver's seat. Maya slides in next to you and buckles before you can get your words out.

"Dad! This is my best friend Maya that I most certainly do not talk about because that'd be embarrassing," you say loudly to make sure that he hears. He laughs a little and thankfully nods.

"Of course. Hello, Maya, it is very nice to meet you. You have quite the name."

Maya gives off her first real smile and you can tell that she already likes your dad. "Thank you. It's Hebrew. My family is Jewish." You never knew that. It wasn't that you weren't open to all holidays, you just sometimes had a really bad habit of assuming everyone celebrated Christmas. You quietly listen as Maya starts to easily talk to your parents and you find out crazy things you never knew about her like she's never had gingerbread and her and Will make their own dreidels every year and have rainbow candles on their menorah and she promises to bring around latkes that she makes with her grandparents each year that you can't wait to try because you've never heard of those before.

"I'm actually part Jewish," your mom admits and you never knew this either and you find this car ride just full of surprises. She talks about the food her parents used to make and you wish you had the chance to try it but your grandparents on her side both died when you

were only a few weeks old. You decide that must be why you guys only really celebrate Christmas.

.

Lucas's house is much smaller than your own and you find that you admire how warm it feels inside. There are pictures all over of smiling faces and birthday parties and you think you even see a few in front of the town firehouse. His parents are lovely and his mother is very, very beautiful and shares many features with Lucas and you like them both very much. She is sweet and his father is funny and now you guys are sitting and eating macaroni that is perfect.

(You decide that everything here resembles your meal because it is all perfect and it is all love and it makes you wish that you had two parents who were home every night for dinner and you had a small house with pictures all over the walls and you had a mother who made perfect mac and cheese instead of your frozen meals and empty halls and echoing rooms decorated by people hired by your mother only because your father isn't around anymore.)

Lucas's mother notices you're frowning and when she gets up to take your empty bowl and she rubs your shoulder quickly. It makes you smile and she asks you about dessert to which you respond that you'd like.

"Do you know the rule for spelling desert and dessert?" Lucas's father asks. You think for a second while your eyebrows bunch together.

"Desert has only one 's' while dessert has two?" you question. He shakes his head. You never learned a rule. Your mother always just taught you to memorize.

"That is right, but there's a rule. Dessert has two 's's while desert only has one because you always want two desserts." He smiles really wide and you can't help but do the same as a piece of chocolate pie is being set in front of you.

"That's the rule that helped me get on the challenge spelling list last year!" Lucas beams and you smile because he's very proud and you can tell by his dad's face that he is, too, and it's very endearing.

"What's your favorite dessert, Maya? I know mine is my beautiful wife's french silk pie." Lucas's father smiles sweetly and her mother blushes. You think to yourself that it must be what love really looks like as you watch her swat at him playfully.

"I really like kolaczki. My bubbe lets me help her make them around the holidays."

"I love kolaczki!" His father is smiling more. "We have this nice woman who always brings them around the... wait, are you Julia's granddaughter?"

Your face lights up because he knows your bubbe. "Yeah... Oh, you must be a fireman then!" All the firehouse pictures make sense now and you smile even more because he likes the cookies you help her make before she brings them there.

"I am. You must be that granddaughter she always brags about. She's a very lovely woman."

You nod because she is before taking a bite of your dessert.

.

Dinner with Maya is great. She's laughing with your dad and now you've all finished dessert and you're dragging her to the pillow fort in your room.

"I made this with my dad last night." You're a little worried because since making it you've sort of realized that Maya acts older than you do and so she might find this lame. "I know it's not really like... cool or whatever. It was his idea. He wanted to make it." You don't want to blame your dad but you do and the guilt makes you purse your lips. To your surprise, she's smiling still.

"I think it's cool. I'm not that good at making forts." You're confused again because thirty seconds ago you saw mature Maya texting on her own cell phone but now you see a girl with eyes bigger than the entire universe while she's staring at your blanket fort with what only can be wonder and you beam with pride as she admits her weakness.

"Maybe one day I'll teach you!" You probably sound too excited but you don't really care. You can bet that Maya has already figured out that you built the fort willingly and with your imaginary construction worker hat on.

She nods eagerly and replies, "I'd like that," before she climbs in and sprawls herself out on the blankets. You begin to climb in, but you pause for a second and the corners of your mouth tug up because this is the first time you've really ever seen Maya just laying back relaxed, and, as previously noted, you've been friends for five weeks and six days and you even called her your best friend and she didn't disagree. You wonder why she doesn't have a different best friend because so far she's been really cool to be around and she doesn't make fun of you like some of the other kids do and she is even left home alone sometimes, and you wonder enough to ask her about it.

"I'm glad you're my best friend, Maya Papaya... Why don't you have any other best friends?" You've told her about Isaiah and Billy but they are each other's best friend and not really yours, and she hasn't really mentioned anyone. You watch her body tense and you're suddenly scared you asked the wrong thing.

"I used to have a best friend."

"Oh." You can tell she doesn't really want to talk about it so you decide to just lay next to her and you grab her hand because that's what your mom does when you don't really want to talk about things. "Well, now we're best friends and that's cool."

"Yeah," she says, her blank face forming a tiny smirk while she turns to you, "That's cool." You decide not to push it and you tell her about how you got the lights to hang perfectly under the

blankets.

You find out really late why she doesn't have a best friend anymore and the reason makes your chest tighten up.

"She died." You guys hadn't really spoken in a while and you were just kind of staring at the Christmas lights hung up around your fort when she says it. Her voice scares you because you thought she was asleep but apparently not.

"Who?" You ask but you kind of assume that you know who.

"My old best friend. Her name was Riley. She was very ill."

"You use a lot of big words for things." You blurt out your thought without noticing. You see that 'ill' isn't really a bigger word than 'sick' but still it's not what you normally hear.

"My mother says that without an extensive vocabulary it's hard to be taken seriously. That's why she gets me the books that she does." Suddenly it makes sense why you sometimes see Maya with really thick books at recess instead of playing with everyone else and why when your class does reading group projects she is sitting with the teacher instead of with her group learning vocabulary.

"Oh... What do you mean? That she was... um... ill?" The word feels odd on your tongue and you decide that it's not for you.

"She had alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma. It's a type of cancer that was in her arms and her legs and her chest. It's typically found in older children and teens." She sounds like a textbook and you can tell that she spent time researching this disease and that makes you sad because from what you can tell, she was trying to find help and she couldn't. "Her skin grew very pale and I helped her go shopping for lots of hats but we were both too young and before we knew it she was gone and so I used to have a best friend and I don't anymore."

You frown and reach for her hand, squeezing it once you find it and turning at her to see her eyes staring at the lights sadly.

"She died last year. She lived in my old neighborhood. We used to live a few cities over with my father. He's dead, too. He killed himself, though. I think that's why my mother works a lot."

You don't have any words to say. You want to hug her but you also just want to let her talk because from her tone she hasn't told anyone this and this is a lot for anyone to handle, let alone a fifth grader in your small town with a little brother who she helps take care of and a single mother who is gone a lot. You can tell that this is one of those cases your mom told you about and it kind of makes you want to cry but you don't.

"Her mother and my mother were very close. After we moved, we still spent a lot of time over there. I went to her house constantly. My father died when I was really young. Will could barely even talk when he did. We moved here after, but we still went back to see them. She sometimes comes to see me and Will still; her mother does. She comes to our birthdays and sometimes holidays, but you can still tell that she's sad. We're all sad. I missed six days of school when she died. Her mother had my mother bring me to a grief counselor for a few

weeks after, too, but work got in the way so I only saw them like four or five times before we just started pretending that it didn't happen and I had to start focusing on school again."

You tighten your grip on her hand and you feel special that she's sharing this with you. You can tell that she doesn't share a lot because in the time of you two being friends she's practically learned everything about you since you talk more between the two of you and you just recently found out that she's Jewish, but she just confided a deep secret and you can't help but feel like you've definitely found your best friend.

"You're very strong." Your words come out in a whisper and she warily turns to look at you.

"Thank you." You don't exactly know why she's thanking you because you didn't really do anything but that's okay because she's smiling a tiny bit now so you let out a quiet, "You're welcome," before you find that you're both falling asleep.

.

Your mother told you shortly after she stopped taking you to the grief counselor that telling people that your best friend died and you were upset about it would draw nothing but pity from them and you did not want pity. She told you that you didn't need a counselor because she refused to pay money to take you to be looked at as a charity case when you would get that flaunting your depression at school for free. She also told you that if you told your teachers that they'd probably try to make things easier for you in class. You promised her you wouldn't tell them because she would be disappointed in you if you didn't earn your grades. She told you that you should keep your emotions in line and in check and you promised her you would, but you told Lucas that Riley died almost a week ago and he held your hand and called you strong and you wondered why you would avoid that feeling of comfort.

What made it better was that Lucas was treating you absolutely no different than he had before you stupidly spilled your heart in the middle of the night of your very first sleepover within your new friendship- no, best friendship. He still sees you in the morning and smiles a good morning and he still brings you a Snickers in his lunchbox and he still hums you little songs while you read at recess if you don't want to play anything. He calls you after school to talk about anything and his parents even let you bring Will over sometimes and he plays with Lucas's dad so that you and Lucas can spend time together and he isn't left with the nanny that he doesn't like.

"Are we going over to Lucas's today before Mommy gets home, Sissy?"

You smile at the mention of your best friend before shaking your head. "No, sorry, bub. We're going to go home and finish your homework and then we're going to make spaghetti for dinner and Lucas's mom even showed me how to make that peach cobbler that you loved so much." You grab his hand as you walk after slinging his backpack onto your shoulder beside of your own.

"We're having peach clobber?!" His entire face lights up and his missing teeth remind you of Lucas's missing tooth and you find that a

lot of things remind you of your best friend nowadays.

"_Cobbler_ and yes, we are." You approach your house before you hand him your key and let him run ahead. It's not far from the school and if you follow a little path you found your third grade year you can make it home running in four minutes exactly. (You timed it on your phone because you had nothing better to do.)

Once you're inside you immediately take your key back and fasten it to its spot on your key chain before you close and lock the door once more. Will rushes to the table and you can tell that he's excited. Your mother hasn't been home in two weeks and he misses her, though, it's not the longest she's been gone. You take out his homework from his backpack and you set it in front of him before you go and slice an apple for his snack.

You can't help your grin when you notice his words for spelling that week. "Did you know that there's a rule to spelling desert and dessert?"

.

Maya calls you at exactly 9:43 pm and you can tell that she's trying not to cry when she does. Her mom was supposed to come home and you could tell that she was excited by the way she apologized for not being able to talk after school because she had to get everything prepared. She was practically bouncing and she wanted to play and she wanted to laugh and the days her mother is expected home are the days that you see Maya act like the eleven year old she's supposed to be.

"She won't be home until Monday," she says quietly. That's three days from today and you feel angry that she sounds so sad. "I don't know why I didn't expect it, I mean, it's not like she doesn't do this almost every time." It's true and you know because this is not your first phone call regarding her absence of homecoming.

You almost want to laugh because 'absence of homecoming' is a phrase Maya would use and she must be rubbing off on you.

"I'm sorry, Maya Papaya," you give weakly. You don't have much more to say and you feel like you're no help, but she still says that it's okay and it makes you have a sad smile.

"I just feel bad for Will. He was so excited today. After we did his homework, he helped me clean the entire house and mop, we rearranged all of his projects and papers on the fridge in the order he wanted to show her, he helped me make dinner and dessert and he refused to eat without her until eight hit and he realized that she wasn't coming back tonight. Lucas, he ate cold spaghetti for dinner and only half of his bowl of peach cobbler and he barely even wanted his story when I tucked him in." She doesn't normally call you by your name, so when she does your heart sinks to the bottom of your chest because she's more serious than usual and it's typically not good.

Your mind wanders to Will and you frown even more because he's only six and while Maya understands her mother being away, he doesn't. "Maybe you can bring him over here tomorrow? My mom will come pick you up and we can make a big fort in the basement and we can eat your leftover spaghetti and cobbler- heated, of course- and we'll even

have a movie night!"

You hear her break into a smile. "Yeah, that sounds great. He'll love it." She shuffles a bit before she lets out a tiny sigh. "Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Definitely! Now go lay by Will. You know you're dying to." She always sleeps by him on these nights. (And most nights which she refuses to admit to anyone but you.)

"Alright, whatever. Trying to get rid of me and stuff. Doesn't hurt at all." Maya fakes a sniffle and you let out a snort.

"You're a dork."

"Says the nerd."

"I'm not the one with my nose always in a book."

"Whatever, Friar, you collect Star Wars spoons."

"You promised you wouldn't...Go to sleep, Maya."

Finally, she lacks a comeback and you can tell she's walking towards her brother's room. You find yourself content with being able to help with her disappointment even if it's only a little because she doesn't deserve it and neither does Will. "Hey, Maya Papaya?"

"What is it, Huckleberry?" Maya yawns and it's an adorable squeaky yawn that reminds you of a kitten.

"I'm glad you're my best friend." You tell her this a lot but it's only because you need to make sure she definitely knows- because you really are, more than anything else in your life, glad for Maya. You can hear the grin on her lips when she responds, "I'm glad, too."

****_6th Grade_****

Lucas is quite possibly the most frustrating person to text that you've ever known in your entire existence on Earth. In the time since him finally getting a cellphone from his parents until the second you're in, you have read the word "what" spelled "wut" at least forty times. The same applies for "you" becoming "u" and the awful use of 'r' for 'are' and you love Lucas, you really do, and he's your best friend but if he texts you that he's "goin 2 b late 4 slpover" one more time you're going to cancel it altogether.

You don't understand it. You are both twelve, though he is on the younger side, and you both are soon to be teenagers, which means that you two should be able to use simple grammar. You were both placed in the same double honors English class and you watched him get back his flawless language arts quiz like last week and it's soâ€¦infuriating.

As if you signaled it, your phone buzzes with another notification telling you that he sent another message. Again. With the same spelling errors.

****Lucas Joseph Friar, if you do not text me using proper English I am**

never going to talk to you again.**

You groan as you see his response pop up.

Maya Papaya! chill out! XDDDDDDD

**Lucas. I will delete your number. **

U wont cuz u luv me

**I will burn all of your baseball cards. Right now, don't test me.
**

Okay, okay, I'm sorry.

You let out a short breath at actual words that are in the dictionary, though, you have to remind yourself how hard Lucas can be on himself and how he would probably take this as you being annoyed with him as a whole instead of just the texting thing, which you don't want because you hate when he feels bad. Being his best friend for the year leading had trained your mind to be cautious around Lucas's places of insecurity, reassuring him that he is not as poorly standing as he imagines.

I'm sorry, too. It's just frustrating. It's like having to translate languages with your texts and I'm probably overreacting.

The stubborn part of your mind tells you that you are not overreacting, but you know you are. Sixth graders or not, being anal about grammar used while texting probably isn't something to break prized possessions over.

_No, it's alright. I prefer your voice anyways. It's way better than staring at a screen. _

You smile and your face burns as you read his message. He compliments you a lot and each time your reaction remains the same; blushing cheeks, stupid grin, flipping stomach. These symptoms go no where as a picture of Lucas wearing his cowboy pajamas while tiredly dozing off into his bowl of cereal lights up your screen. The name 'Bull Dozer' flashes above the photo which makes you laugh, even three months after you made the joke about him falling asleep into his bowl of Frosted Flakes.

"Why hello there, Sleeping Beauty."

He chuckles under his breath before he responds to you. "Oh shut up. I can hear the smile in your voice about your stupid joke."

"It's a good joke."

"It's a stupid joke." He's smiling and he's rolling his eyes. You can't see it but you know; you can just tell.

"You're a stupid joke."

He now full on laughs and you think that he has one of the best laughs you've ever heard. "Maya, you are such a loser."

"And you're my best friend so what does that say about you?"

"It says that I'm a kind and sweet soul who befriended the lamest girl in school." You smile because he's joking and you begin to walk to unlock your front door. "I'm on my way."

"Alright, let me just barricade the entrance and turn the lights out."

.

Your mother told you today that she is sick and you knew, you have since you were younger, but she told you today with tears in her eyes that she is sick and it is getting worse.

"I know that it's not easy to understand, Lucas, but I'm trying my best so that this can be easier on us."

Your stomach turns but there's no reason for it to. You guys have talks like this every couple months. She's just getting her medicine upped or changed.

"I know. Communication keeps us strong, right?" She tells you this every time this happens.

She breaks into a smile but it looks weak and tired. She must really need the change. "Yes, Lucas, which is why I need you to listen, sweetheart."

"I know, Mom. Are they upping your medicine again?" She looks at you like she's broken. You've known your mother to be sick your entire life so it's not like this is anything new. You know it's not. It can't be.

"No, sweetheart. They're not. They're taking me off of my medicine." You break into a laugh because this must be a joke.

"That's silly, mom." You laugh again before you kiss her cheek, "I have to go unlock the door, though, because Maya Papaya is going to be here soon. You better call that doctor and tell him that your medicine probably just needs to be upped again."

"Lucas, we need to"

The doorbell rings and you hop up, placing another kiss on her cheek. "Don't forget to call the doctor!"

You run down the hall chuckling again because they wouldn't take your mom off her medicine. Without her medicine your mom would die and that would mean they gave up on her, which they wouldn't. You know that they wouldn't. Of course they wouldn't. She's probably calling her doctor right now and telling him what a silly mistake he made and he's laughing and apologizing and writing her prescription and faxing it to the pharmacy.

"Hey, you alright, Huckleberry?" Maya's voice drags you from your thoughts before you realize that you're standing still in front of your open door.

"Oh, yeah! Totally!" You try to give a smile but you can't and she

notices. "Kind of." You feel a frown pulling your lips, but you don't know why because none of this is different.

Your mom will be fine like she always is. She just needs to call the doctor. Doctors make mistakes sometimes, they're only people after all, and she is going to call and tell him that she needs her medicine raised and he didn't tell her that they're taking her off it. If they took her off of it then your mom would die and that's ridiculous because she isn't going to die. She can't die. Your eyes betray you with tears and your lip is pouting but you still don't know why because your mom isn't dying. A tear slips down your cheek and that's when you feel your entire body collapsing in on itself and a few more fall before you feel Maya's arms around you, settling on the ground as you begin to sob.

You hate it because you feel like a baby- a big, dumb crying baby that isn't the man you're supposed to be for your parents, for your mom.

You hate it all so much.

.

"Maya, doctors make mistakes, don't they?" Lucas is sniffing lightly as he wipes his cheeks with his sleeves sloppily. You held him for half an hour before he couldn't breathe and needed his rescue inhaler from the sobbing taking its toll, and you're terrified that if you answer wrong, he's going to start again, so you try your best.

"I'm sure they do. Maybe not in the medical sense as much, but they are human after all. Nobody's perfect." Your eyes notice his lip jut out a bit more as you say medical which breaks your heart a little because it hits you that this must be about his mother. "What did she tell you?"

Lucas stares at you like his moon was torn from the sky and the stars had been stolen from his eyes and it physically hurts you to see it. "They're taking her off her medicine."

You know that without her medication, Lucas's mother will die. In the time knowing the family, you easily slipped in by coming over often with Will and helping them with birthdays and church fundraisers and anything they did, really. His mother rubs your back and talks to you and Will when you are sad and she makes you hot chocolate and tucks you in when it's the middle of the night and you had almost forgotten that feeling.

Along with you and your brother being accepted into the household, you'd learned that Lucas's mother is very sick and that they were patiently waiting for a sort of miracle to cure her.

(It must not be coming.)

You sit on the bed beside his body and wrap your arm around him the best that you can. You feel the weight of his head and the world on your shoulder a second later. "I'm sorry, Lucas." You know it doesn't help much but it's all you really have to offer and he knows this and accepts it. Lucas has the kindest heart you've ever known.

"I know, Shortstack. I should've known this was happening, really. I

mean, it's just so easy to forget. Some days she's bed ridden and I know that it's not going to be okay because they expected her to die years ago but then she has days where she's doing everything and she's so full of energy and life andâ€¦ I forget. I forget it all and it hits me even harder each time." You've seen both these days and you know the feeling in his heart. When he speaks of this, it makes you think of Riley. You try not to because pulling your attention from Lucas is selfish, but you can't help it. You think of Riley lying in her bed with a pale smile on her face.

She told you it was okay. She told you she was sick and it was okay because everything happens for a reason and you told her it wasn't because she couldn't die. She wasn't going to.

But she did and your mind follows you to Lucas and you realize that if she hadn't died then you never would be this close to him. He wouldn't be your best friend. Without Riley dying you would be without Lucas and you can't fight the bittersweet pounding of your heart because Riley was the smartest person you'd ever met.

"Lucasâ€¦ What if she's meant to die?" Your eyes go wide because that came out wrong and you shake your head but he's already torn himself from your body. "No, wait, I didn't mean it like thatâ€¦"

"Then how did you mean it, Maya?" He's standing and he's angry and you know that he's upset and that he isn't thinking how he normally does, but it doesn't matter. He's in tears again and you know he needs to let this out.

"I meant that everything happens for a reason, Lucas, and maybe-"

"That's a lie. That is crap, Maya. It doesn't happen for a reason. There is no reason for my mom to die." You're cringing because you've never seen Lucas this mad before or even mad at you at all and he has never in your entire friendship raised his voice at you.

"I-I know, it's just that whenever death has happened around me, there are always some positives that come out of-"

"I don't know what you need to tell yourself so that you can deal with the fact that your dad killed himself and your old friend is dead, but they have nothing to do with my mom, Maya. They have nothing to do with her and you don't know everything so get over it. They're dead and my mom is not so stop making this about you. Stop trying to make me feel bad for you because my mom isn't dead and your dad is. Stop trying to make me feel sorry for you because you watched your friend die because my mom doesn't have cancer and she isn't dead. This isn't about you." You see his eyes widen up as soon as he speaks those words and he tries to move closer but you shove yourself away quickly.

All you can hear is _selfish, selfish, selfish _ringing in your ears.

"Iâ€¦ Mayaâ€¦" He's crying but you can't focus on that. Of course, you can't. You can only focus on yourself. "I didn't mean that."

You rise to your feet because you don't deserve his apologies. You

don't deserve for him to take it back. You don't deserve Lucas.
You've never deserved Lucas.

"Maya, please. Please don't cry."

You're trying not to. You shouldn't be crying. There's no reason for you to cry. Lucas should be crying and you need to stop making this about you. You need to stop begging for pity.

"Maya, I'm sorry."

You cringe again because you don't deserve those words. You move to the door quickly with your breath short. You hear him follow you but you can't do it, you don't deserve him. You can't listen to him and you can't see because of the tears and then you realize you can't breathe.

You're struggling to breathe and you're scratching at your cheeks because the tears are making them itch and you're trying to make it to the door but a warm figure catches you and you're frantically trying to escape and you're trying to get away because you don't deserve warmth. You don't deserve to be held. You're gasping and your cheeks are burning from your nails clawing at them and you don't know what to do besides give up.

You have to give up. You are weak. You are undeserving. You are selfish. You go limp against the body and you look up to see Lucas's mom looking at you sadly and running her hand through your hair and it feels nice. You want to yank away and run home and sit alone but you feel that you can't. You're leaning into the touch and the comfort when she lowers down and tells you softly that she has you and to breathe. She's reminding you to breathe and she's counting with you;

In- One. Two. Three. Four. _

Hold- One. Two. Three. Four. _

Out- One. Two. Three. Four. _

Hold- One. Two. Three. Four. _

One. Two. Three. Four.

One. Two. Three. Four.

You repeat it six times, and you're scared that you should be done by now but Lucas's mother stares at you with loving eyes. "Just take your time, sweetheart. We can do it as many times as you need."

You smile a little while you shake. Your mother never lets you take your time when you have fits. She tells you fits are for infants and to collect yourself immediately.

"Let's just get that little shake out of you. You're not the Energizer Bunny, you're my sweet Maya and tears do not have a place in those pretty little eyes."

You feel your heart calm and the pads of her thumbs trace your irritated cheeks.

One. Two. Three. Four.

.

Maya isn't talking to you anymore.

It isn't that she's ignoring you because she still comes over and she still says actual words to you, but they're mostly meaningless and she won't tell you why she's upset like she used to. You know it's your fault and what you said to her. You didn't mean it, but it all just came out and you don't know why it did or why you couldn't control it. She gives you one or two worded answers and spends a lot of time reading and when she's not reading she's quiet and you don't watch Say Yes To The Dress with her anymore because she's so quiet.

You both used to sit on your couch and turn on TLC during the Fridays when they had wedding shows marathoning because she has this soft spot for them and she would wear your mom's wedding dress because it was elegant and graceful and timeless and beautiful and so was Maya.

You wore your dad's suit jacket and tie with the little patterned pocket square to match his bride's gown. It wasn't nearly as detailed as the dress Maya wore, but, even still, Maya said you looked handsome and it made your stomach turn. She wouldn't even put on the dress when you brought it out for the marathon a few days ago. She told you it was okay and she didn't feel very well so she didn't need to wear the wedding dress. While the episodes were on she didn't even tell you how much she hated the dress with the feathers like she always does because she cannot stand feathers on any type of dress.

_"__They belong on birds not on a wedding dress,"_ she'd say, _"__I don't know what she's even thinking. She's blowing twenty thousand dollars to look tacky,"_ if only she were speaking to you.

You didn't want her to know how upset it made you, but you think she could tell because she held your hand while you watched TV and gave you one of those sad smiles that she gives Will sometimes when he has a bad dream.

You felt like a baby which sort of happens around her, but it was just that this was your _thing_. You both sit on your couch on Friday nights while Will builds Legos with your dad and you watch Say Yes To The Dress or Four Weddings and you talk about your wedding days because Maya loves to talk about your wedding days and you love listening to Maya talk so it's a win-win situation. You both wear your parents' clothes and you laugh at ugly dresses and you listen to her plan to have an ice bar and an obnoxious photo booth at her reception and she doesn't ignore you. The most important thing about your Fridays is that Maya doesn't ignore you and you both laugh and you pretend and you talk and you have fun with each other because you love each other and that's what best friends do.

(More than often you picture yourself marrying Maya, but you don't tell her that when you talk about it.)

Your chest tightens because none of this matters any more. None of it

matters because Maya isn't talking to you and so Bride Days are ruined and your friendship is ruined and everything is ruined.

You feel like a baby again because you turn your head and see Maya, _oh so mature_ Maya, reading some book in French. She was reading in ****French****. You found out she spoke the language just recently when you were finally introduced to her mom after over a year of being best friends who spends most of her time in Europe and chose to favor anywhere but home- but even still, you'll take what you can get in any language because you just want her to talk to you again.

.

"Hey, Maya Papaya?" Will is sitting across the table from you with big eyes as his full plate of dinner sits in front of him. You smile a little at the nickname he picked up from Lucas and glance to meet his stare.

"Yes, Will?" You frown as you notice he hasn't eaten any of his Chinese food. You ordered it particularly because it's his favorite and he did so well on his spelling work and progress report and, really, anything he brought home that he deserves a treat. You want to make sure that he knows how proud you are of him, of how proud everyone is of him.

"Are you and Lucas still best friends?"

The question makes you tense and you purse your lips before answering. "Of course, why do you ask?" You know why he's asking. You haven't been acting the same since his blowup and your meltdown in his mother's arms and he's noticed. He always does. He's such a smart kid, of course he does.

"I don't know. You don't really laugh around him as much anymore. And he looks sad around you when you don't. And me and Auggie laugh all the time and so I know he's my best friend!" His eyes light up with excitement and he flashes an uneven grin. His teeth are quickly falling and growing into place and you remind yourself to put a memo in your phone to make sure that you set aside your singles to use for tooth fairy money. There's nothing more disappointing than waking up to a pillow on top of a handful of quarters, granted it was more than you got, but still. He deserves the nicely folded dollar bills that he saves up for the night you take him to the arcade every month so that he has extra spending money from the twenty you hand him. If your mother's consistent with anything, at least it's money.

"I know you guys do. He's a really good friend to you, huh?" You've seen him walk out with Auggie every day after school since the beginning of this year, and now approaching eight you can't believe that your little Will has a best friend. His mother is kind and she works a lot (though she works nights and sleeps while Auggie's in school so she can take care of him afterwards so she's home to him all the time which you think is nice and a bold sacrifice to make). She trusts you and she knows your situation and sometimes freezes casseroles for you to make for dinner which you appreciate because with homework and your mother pressuring you to teach yourself piano it's tough to crank out fully nutritional meals for Will and she'll watch the boys after school when they want to play at the park and give Will a ride home and she's sweet, very sweet. Her number is

saved in your phone and you know that you can call her to watch Will if you ever need it which is nice because she knows what snacks to feed him and to do it before homework and that he's allergic to coconut and pineapple and you've never really trusted anyone with Will ever besides Lucas's parents, but you trust her with him which is a really nice feeling to have.

"Yeah! He's awesome and he plays Skylanders with me and even has Trap Team, Maya Papaya. How cool is that?" He's started eating his food and he's talking animatedly now about the game he's obsessed with and you can't wait for his birthday so he can open up his new Playstation with the latest version of the game that he's been talking about for months.

"That's super cool, bub. Maybe I can text his mom and we can see about you going over there this weekend?"

"No, I think I want to go to Lucas's. We're still talking about him, y'know." When you called him smart before you accidentally left out sneaky and his perfect memory of everything that he's picked up over the years. You roll your eyes and he shakes his head. "I don't know what happened, but I think he's really sorry, Maya. I asked his dad when we were making the spaceship that I got for Christmas and he said that Lucas was upset and said some things he didn't mean. He told me that sometimes we do things without thinking because we're scared and hurt, but he thinks that it'll all work itself out and that no matter what he'll always be around to build Legos with me." You smile because Lucas's father is great and he confessed to you that he's always wanted another son, though, he loves Lucas to no extent, and that's why he's more than happy to spend some time with Will and to help be a positive male role model in his life, if that was okay with you and your mother.

You tell him that it's perfectly fine and you're glad he's there to help you with Will. You're glad everyone you've picked up in your lives are there to help you guys now.

You never realized how much better it could make things be from how your mother described it.

"I'm sure he will." You think over the fact that Lucas apologized to you numerous times and that every time you look into his eyes you see the sincerity that you're sure won't be there.

"You say things you don't mean sometimes, Maya. You remember that one time at the park that you told that duck it was stupid?" You chuckle a little bit because he remembers the most random stories from countless insignificant days.

"Yes, William, I remember calling the duck stupid."

"Yeah, but he wasn't and you admitted it when you got home! You were mad he took the sandwich from the bench when I set it down on my paper bag so I wouldn't get germs like you told me. But then the next day we just brought him his own sandwich I made so that you could apologize." You remember him forcing you to help him make an apology sandwich and set it down on the ground on a paper bag so that the duck wouldn't get any germs.

"I'm the duck in this case, huh?" You know he's right. For someone so

young, he's bright. He reminds you of yourself sometimes; far ahead of your years. You frown at that mostly because you don't want him to grow up too quick; You want him to enjoy being a kid as long as he can, but sometimes you want to smile at it because you know that he's going to go places and he will handle himself well.

"Yes, you're the duck and he's handing you apology sandwiches a lot. It's time to take a little nibble, Maya Papaya."

You laugh as he takes a small bite to dramatize his words. "Alright. Whatever you say, kiddo."

.

Maya calls you before you get into bed and you smile when she does because it'd been a week and a half since she called you and your mom said if you were patient that she'd call and she was right. You need to remember to tell her as soon as you see her that you did get a call.

You answer it eagerly and her voice hits you and it makes your heart stop because, wow, have you missed that voice.

"Hey, Lucas." She's nervous and you know because whenever Maya is nervous she has this thing where she starts to mumble and her face gets pink and it's really cute and you can hear how cute it is in her voice.

"Howdy."

She relaxes and lets the air out of her lungs as she laughs a little bit, "Isn't that usually what I say to you?"

This is easy and she is talking to you like she used to which is all you've wanted for ten entire days.

"Well," you say in a matter-of-fact tone, "you actually haven't been calling me at all, so that's not true."

Maya scoffs and you never thought you could miss the annoying reactions that your best friend makes when you're trying to be intimidating, but you did and hearing the noise from the back of her throat makes your grip tighten and your smile widen and your heart is about to burst because she's back. Your best friend is back and she loves you and she's talking to you and things couldn't be better.

"Sundance, don't make me regret this by jabbing at me."

But you only laugh because you know that she won't because she's your best friend in the entire world and she called you Sundance and you can hear her smile, even though, of course, it's not just for you.

(That doesn't stop you from pretending that it is.)

.

Will is turning eight today and it's quite possibly the hardest thing you've ever gone through. He's dressed in a dress shirt with tiny

little rockets all around it and a dark blue bow tie is secured around his neck. He smiles at you brightly with the gaps across his grin and you want to cry because he's growing up. You can't stop him from doing it no matter how you try and now your little brother is turning eight years old.

"Maya Papaya, is Lucas coming today?"

You nod your head. "Of course. Why would he miss his favorite kiddo's birthday party, silly?"

"I have absolutely no clue. I just wanted to be sure. He's super cool. I'm gonna ask him to be my second best friend soon, kinda like a brother." He looks down bashfully. "I already talked to his parents. They said I'm a perfect fit for the family."

You're both already a part of the family. You figured that he would know that by the special breakfast that Lucas's mother made him and the Lego birthday cake that his father presented to him with the dorky grin that he passed down to Lucas, but, for such a smart kid, he tends to be a bit dim around his place in their hearts. "They're not wrong."

He gives this charming look that reminds you of your dad. He used to smile at your mother just like that. It was when she used to laugh so much and she would come home every night and she would tuck you and your brother in while your dad sang soft lullabies. You really need to shake off these memories. You remind yourself that they'll get you nowhere.

"William, you can't possibly be wearing that silly shirt." Your mother's voice washes through the room and you see Will's eyes dim a little. He picked it out himself when you took him to the mall and he thought that it was the absolute most amazing thing he's ever seen.

"I can't?" He asks and you know it's a bad idea because your mother hates when you talk back.

"No, William. Take that off immediately and put on something more formal. I refuse to have you seen wearing something as ridiculous as a shirt with little..." A look of disgust crosses her mouth. "Racecars or whatever the tiny pattern consists of."

His lip pouts a little and you're finding yourself angry because this is his birthday. He should be enjoying it.

"Mother, they're spaceships." You don't realize you're speaking until the words are slipping from your lips.

"What was that, Maya?" Her voice is rising at that and she sounds mad. Your tone starts to fall as her eyes meet yours. You divert your eyes but they meet Will's and he looks crushed that his birthday isn't even going to be his day and you just can't stop yourself.

"On his shirt. They're spaceships. He really likes the shirt. He picked it out himself for his birthday." You're mumbling a bit and she steps closer to you. "Maybe you should let him wear it for his party. I think that he looks very handsome." You watch him form a crooked smile and it's all worth it. The look that you're receiving

is worth it because he needs to know that he looks nice in the shirt he picked out for his birthday.

Suddenly she has a smile on her lips and it makes you nervous. Now she's nodding towards your little brother. "Very well. William, run along to your guests. I believe your sister and I need to have a conversation."

You're scared. You're so scared. You've spoken out of place to your mother only three times before and she has yet to touch you in any harmful way but her gaze makes you feel like your lungs are filled with the dust from chalk and your skin is crawling. You try to step backwards but her steps towards you are quicker and she has her arm firmly on your shoulder.

"Maya, I don't think I need to remind you of your place in this household." She's so mad and she's spitting your name out like it's poison and you want to cry, but you can't. If you cry then you're begging for attention and you don't want her pity. You don't want anyone's pity. "You are a child, Maya. You do not disrespect me by speaking out against my words, especially not in front of your younger brother. You're the child and I'm the adult and if I say that he is not wearing a ridiculous shirt with whatever is on them to his party filled with people who expect well dressed children greeting them, then you will be quiet. You keep your mouth shut and stop begging for attention, Maya. This is ridiculous. You are ridiculous." She's getting louder and louder as she goes on and you feel tinier and tinier with each rise of volume she provides. "Get these disrespectful outbursts out of the way. You will get absolutely nowhere with a mindset like this."

She's right. You know it. You're never getting anywhere. You're rude. Why would anyone give you a chance?

"If you're going to start crying then get out of my sight. I don't need a show. I need a respectful daughter who will do more than disappoint me with her worthless episodes because she doesn't remember that she is not the center of this family. Don't you think you've ruined your brother's day enough, Maya? Today is not about you." She's shaking her head and walking towards the door. "You can join the party when you've decided that you can put aside yourself for enough time to actually consider William."

You want to fight but any defense escapes your mind because she's right. She's always right. Your mother is never wrong because she loves you and she wants you to succeed. She wants you to be the very best and you're holding yourself from it because you're selfish. You're so selfish. You're ruining Will's birthday and now you're crying and you realize that you want something. Of every time you've ever been confronted, you've never felt the need for something but right now you crave a warm touch.

You start to realize that you crave Lucas's warm touch or his mother's warm touch or even his father's hug. You want to feel loved and you want to feel like you matter and it's because you're being selfish again. You're always being selfish.

You take a deep breath and you turn towards the door because you need to go and be there for your brother.

One. Two. Three. Four.

One. Two. Three. Four.

_7th Grade _

"You remind me of her."

Maya is laying across from you on your bed and it's easily two or three in the morning. You spend a lot of nights just sitting and talking but the thing is you really wouldn't trade it because she always seems to open up once it passes midnight. Her hair is even pulled back with a headband which you're grateful for because you can study every feature of her face.

"What do you mean?"

She has a smile on her face that's not full but only slight and her eyes are drifting up and down. You can't help but move a little closer because she has that tone that you love that she has when she tells you stories.

"You remind me of Riley. It's not just in the obvious ways like your eyes are filled with all this curiosity and optimism. And you both have that little curve when you smile." She raises her hand and lightly taps the corner of her lips to emphasize her point. You've seen pictures of Riley and heard stories of her and it's exciting to be compared to her. "It's not just like that, though. You make me smile on the days where I don't think I can like she did." Maya tells you things like this sometimes and each time it feels like you just found three of your mom's strawberry shortcake cookies on the counter and it wasn't even a birthday or holiday. "It sounds silly. I mean, I was eight when I actually saw her last, y'know? It's been pretty much five years. I still remember her, though, vividly. She was so much taller than me. Her hair was very smooth and it had this gorgeous shine that I used to be so jealous of. My hair was always so, so much thicker and far curlier than hers and, well, I was a mess compared to her in general. Her voice was soft and joyful. She always was out to make everyone happy; just like you. She always did make everyone happy; just like you again." Your eyes glance down while your cheeks burn. You can't help but wonder how Maya sees you in the ways that she does. "She and I were inseparable. Our mothers would dress us in the most expensive gowns that we would destroy outside in the dirt. '_The prettiest dresses for the prettiest girls_', they would tell us. We laughed at it." She laughs a little now and her laugh sounds like a million puppies playing except better. "When I found my father, she held my hand while I cried. I had just walked in on my father behind his desk with a bullet in his head, and she held my hand and told me that it would be okay. I believed her. I felt insane because I had just lost him and he was my dad. I was his little girl. I felt insane because she told me it would be okay and I can remember looking into her eyes and knowing it would."

Maya doesn't talk much about her dad so when she does you tend to just let her speak.

"He was really great, y'know. He was really fun. We did pretty much everything together. It was me and him until Will rolled along, and then it was me, him, and Will. We were inseparable. Well... until he was gone. And it used to tear me apart because Will has been

heartbroken about it his entire life. With my dad gone and my mom gone now, he didn't even get to enjoy the days he was around. He doesn't remember them. I sometimes have trouble remembering them. I was so scared that he'd grow up absolutely miserable and he wouldn't smile or laugh or do anything he wanted, but all Riley had to do was look at me and tell me that he would be okay and I had no doubts he would."

You don't want to say much because you know that if you say the wrong thing she could shut down and you know you don't want her to. She's told you the circumstances of how he died and when she found him, but each time you hear it your heart stops for a second. She doesn't like talking about him or really Will in the negative sense that much. It's almost like she's dancing around it to avoid jinxing it. Her eyes meet yours and her lips are molding into a grin from the pursed look they'd taken on which sends a rush of relief through your body. "You make me feel insane like that. You grab my hand and you tell me that things will be great and I believe you." You start to smile widely and it makes her teeth show in her own smile now. "My blind faith in you is going to be the end of me, Lucas Friar."

You can't stop your hand from reaching hers and squeezing it.

.

Lucas's favorite color is yellow because it is the color of the flowers that he places on his mother's bedside table the first night of her last. He chose the orchids from the entire array the florist had because they were the only yellow in a sea of pinks and whites and they vibrated life and joy which reminded you of Lucas's smile and his laugh and his quest for world peace. He tells you as he puts the money for the bunch on the counter that his favorite color has shifted from red to yellow because yellow is the most beautiful color he's ever seen.

You glance at his wide grin and you agree.

"Huckleberry, your mom wants some more ice cream from the cafeteria; ya want me to bring you up a cup?" You're gently tapping Lucas's shoulder. You're on winter break from school, so you've spent four nights straight in the hospital beside Lucas's mother in her bed while his father is at home with Will and visits during the day. It's nearing nine which means that his mother is due for another seizure and you can't bear to be in the room again while it happens. Riley had seizures from a reaction to some medicine they put her on for nausea, and since then, every time you see one, your body freezes and your lungs shrink because your best friend's dying breath was given in the midst of her body convulsing and you don't really know to handle that anymore. You know that she understands because she glanced at the clock before she asked you for a chocolate vanilla swirl.

Lucas's eyes drift from the tile of the floor to yours. He looks tired and sad but he's trying to fight it. "Oh, I'll go with you, Maya Papaya." You walk over to his mother's bed and you place a kiss on her forehead before Lucas does the same. "We'll be right back, mom."

From the bed you receive a weak nod before she puckers her lips to

mimic a kiss back. "Take your time, kids. I love you."

"We love you, too." You both say it in unison. You say it before leaving the room at any time for any reason like it is programmed into your reflexes but you don't mind. You've realized within the past year that Lucas's mother has been more of a mother to you than your own, and it slowly starts to pick apart your viewpoint on how to express your emotions. Even if your mother doesn't need to say 'I love you' often to mean it, it's nice to hear and it's nice to say back when you mean it with your entire heart to someone. Lucas's hand clasps with yours and you hear him whisper that he loves you as well.

(Okay, so hearing it is very, very, very nice.)

Lucas races you to the elevator, though it's not much of a race when you're connected by your limbs and he's dragging you along. He's wearing his slippers that look like cowboy boots and you're wearing his pair that he outgrew last winter which should make you feel ridiculous but you don't. You think that your entire outfit should make you feel ridiculous seeing as you're wearing matching pajama pants covered with snowflakes on navy blue and you're both wearing sweaters that Lucas's father got you for Christmas that have your initials like the Weasley's mother made in Harry Potter, but you still don't and you won't question it because you're warm and you're happy.

"I think I want to get gummy bears on mine, Shortstack. Do you have any vending money left?" He tells you this while you're landing on the lower level and you both immediately turn right to get to the cafeteria.

"I just have the money for the ice cream, but I can run and get some when we bring it back up." He smiles at you more before he's tugging you into line and you're sliding along a tray with three glass cups on it. You fill each to the brim with the tube in the middle of the machine that swirls both flavors and Lucas plops chocolate sauce onto his own cup and his mother's before showering yours in nuts.

(He does more and more, but you go to pay as he decorates.)

When you make it upstairs you're walking in front of him because he's on the phone saying goodnight to his dad and you're balancing a tray of ice cream while casually tripping over your slippers along the way. You're just to the door when you hear the voices in the room and you feel your stomach start to churn because machines are beeping and this isn't just the nurse that's there for her seizures. You count a total of four voices when you actually turn you see Lucas's mother lying too still and doctors rushing to perform different actions and you can't breathe. You can't breathe and your ice cream falls and this can't be happening because you're supposed to walk in and the three of you are going to watch Criminal Minds like you do with ice cream at nine thirty and there aren't doctors crowding her bed because from the looks of the monitors, she isn't breathing and her heart doesn't have a beat which is crazy because it just did before you left.

There's a nurse pushing you out and she's telling you it's okay that you dropped the tray when you haven't even apologized yet and you still can't breathe and suddenly you're spinning around because Lucas

is there. You rush towards him and he's trying to fight you but he can't see that. You know he can't see that so you push him as hard as you can towards the other side of the hospital and the other side of the world because he can't see what's happening in the room and you won't let him see it. You're shaking your head and you can feel your eyes start to form tears and you're telling Lucas firmly that you can't let him go and he's crying now, too, because he knows what's happening. He knows why there's a nurse in the hallway staring at you two sadly and he knows why you're not letting him go into the room and he knows why there's so much noise coming from it. You both know why exactly that moment feels like the entire world is crashing around you and that's because it is.

.

Your mom dies on a Wednesday.

The doctors tell you that her body gave out because she couldn't handle the strain of being sick and you get out two and a half sentences of your rant on it being their fault from removing her from her normal medicine before Maya grabs your arm and pulls you out of the room and down the stairs and all the way towards the farther side of the lower wing on the other end of the hospital from where you were. She always just kind of knows what to do and for all the time you spend hating it for making you feel childish, you also couldn't be more thankful.

You'd never really known the sense of panic until you were being held back in the hall and what sucks is that it doesn't leave you for a few days. Sure, you've had moments of missing items and too many stacks of homework and dropping something you weren't supposed to, but you never really understood the counting thing that Maya does until she has to teach it to you because it's now you who can't breathe and your heart that is pounding a million beats a second and your eyes are now full of tears while you are shaking- god, you can't stop shaking. Your mom is dead and you're crying and you're shaking and this really sucks because today is Friday but instead of sitting on your couch with your best friend watching TV, you are sitting in your bathroom while Maya irons your shirt to go to your mom's funeral.

"Well, Huckleberry, we're not going to get you dressed if your tears drench all your clothes." She's trying to smile and you are, too, but she's doing a better job. She always does. She amazes you. She finishes up her task before grabbing your tie, too. "Let's just get today done with, yeah? We can relax afterwards with movies and cocoa and anything you want."

She presses a soft kiss to your cheek and half of your face is pulling into a smile and your body feels hot. You don't know how she manages to get you to feel this way, but for the first time since Wednesday your heart is beating fast and it's not because you're panicking. It's beating fast because that's what Maya does to you.

She trails her fingertips down your cheek and smiles at you softly before telling you that if you don't get your ass dressed in the next five minutes, she's going to beat you up. "Shut up, dipshit."

"This is what I get for supporting you, Friar." You chuckle before

she fakes a pout, her arm draping across her chest. "How will I ever confess my undying love for you now if this is what I get for being honest?" She flashes you this smile that makes your stomach turn and nothing is wrong in the moment because when Maya looks at you with those eyes and that smile nothing can possibly be wrong despite how upset you are.

She's sort of your soulmate, you decide, because while all the other people you know are talking about dating and dances, (which is crazy because you're only thirteen and you don't know why everyone just wants to grow up but whatever) you and Maya just have fun talking about each other and the stars and the world around you.

She kisses your forehead before she turns and the lace of her dress grazes your arm. Her touch is soft and it reminds you of your mom.

(Your heart starts pounding again but not because of Maya and so you start to count in time with your lungs.)

"I'm just going to go check on Will, and I'll be right back, okay?" She's managing to balance checking and getting all you, Will, and your dad ready for today which really is insane. She woke up before eight to do her hair and she put on the most breathtaking black dress you've ever seen and her makeup makes her look so much older and she's so pretty and she's so great. She's so wonderful and you want to tell her this so you jump up and follow her to the guest room but something stops you before you walk in.

Will is crying. The happy-go-lucky, Lego building third grader that you love like he is your own brother is crying in your guest room and it's kind of breaking your heart.

"It's just not fair. I didn't even get to know her. It's what happened with dad, Maya. This is what happened with him except she didn't kill herself. She wanted me. No one else even wants me and she wanted me and she loved me, but now she's gone."

"No, no, no," Maya coos at him with her fingers swiping his tears, "I don't ever want to hear that." She kneels in front of him and her voice gets firmer. "Don't ever think that no one wants you. Ever." You watch her run her hand through her hair and you want to reach out to her, but you don't. You know you shouldn't. "Will, I love you. I love you more than anything else in this world. Do you know that?"

He nods sadly and smiles for a second before it falls again.

"I need you to listen to me when I tell you this. Dad wanted you. Will, he loved you so much. Sometimes... things are more complicated than we can understand, especially when we're young. You're just a kid still. No one expects you to understand it. You don't even have to believe me if you don't want to or you can't; that's okay. Even with him out of the picture, Mother loves you. Lucas loves you. His father loves you. Your friends love you. Bubbe and Zayde love you. They all love you and they all want you."

Will's tears have slowed and he's listening to her closely now. (It's nice to know that she has this effect on others, too.)

"Lucas's mother loved you, too, Will. Of course, she did. And I know that it's hard to take in, but doctors can only do so much. Things take their course and it's hard to handle but things will get easier. Not right away, but they will. And even if they don't seem to, I'll be here with you the entire way. If you have nothing else, I'll be here to love you and want you and to take care of you enough for every being in this universe."

He sniffs his nose and he smiles full on while his arms fly around her neck. You hear her laugh and a quiet 'I love you' muffled into her shoulder before you decide that you should leave them. Honestly, you shouldn't have even followed her.

But you did.

And you invaded her time with her brother and you could've easily ruined their moment and you turn to move towards the kitchen because you just need some water. You're going to get some water and then you're going to go to the cemetery and you're going to watch your mom get buried.

God. Your mom is going to get buried.

You try to take a breath and remember what to do.

One. Two. Three. Four.

.

Lucas doesn't really want to celebrate his birthday this year. You're not surprised. His mother died three months ago, but you still find him torn apart and he's still not the same as he was before. You don't expect him to be.

Your mother is upset you're never home, but neither is she so you find it rather ironic, and you choose to ignore it because you know that Lucas and his father need you and Will around.

"Hey, Huckleberry. I made you a surprise." You balance the plate behind your back as you walk into his room.

He's lying still, face down to the covers just as he's been all day, and it's rounding on six which is not really a proper way to spend your thirteenth birthday. You were lucky enough to have his mom around for yours. She made you cinnamon rolls and special red velvet cookies and you feel awful because honestly, it should've been Lucas doing that. He should be spending today with his mother. You can't help feeling like you took that from him.

Selfish, selfish, selfish.

"I don't want any surprises." He's talking into his pillow and it makes you laugh, which peaks his interest enough that he glances up.

"Oh really? Well, it happens to be a very chocolatey drizzled surprise, which I know you're fond of." He sits up higher and his eyes are directed to your hands behind your back.

"Well..." He's doing that cute awkward smile thing that he does where

his lips are pressed tightly together and you missed it. You missed him. He comes around in flashes but lately his mind has been distant-and he's trying to push through, you know he is because Lucas is incredible. He's the strongest person you know.

"I mean, if you brought it, it would really be rude of me not to check it out..." He moves closer and presses his body against yours to reach around and grab the plate. Lucas tugs the creampuff that you made for him and his smile grows to a full on shining grin. He takes a bite before speaking again. "Holy crap, Maya Papaya, this is delicious."

You swat and look down. "Nah. It's nothing. I, uh... I looked up recipes from your mom's cookbook. It took a while to perfect it. Well, like all day, but whatever. It was whatever."

He's still smiling and it makes you so happy because his smile is your favorite smile and, damn, you've missed it. "...You called her my mom."

You're not sure why he's announcing it, but he looks like it's this huge moment. "Isn't that what she is?"

"No, no- wait, yeah. She is my mom- um, was? She was my mom. But you called her my _mom_." You're still confused, but he's still smiling that wide smile with all his teeth showing while taking little bites of his creampuff so you decide that it's okay. "You've just never not used mother before. You always called her my mother."

"Oh."

You were always taught to address parents properly. You were told it's not polite to use mom or dad or any form other than the formal mother and father. If you don't use formal words then people won't respect you and you won't be successful. It's a trail. Everything is linked and you need to make sure that you keep yourself on track because you need to be successful. The last thing Will needs is another parent gone, especially for something as self absorbed as being disappointed in you.

"I like it." You're trying to remind yourself that everything is linked but now Lucas's eyes are wide and bright and you haven't seen them like that since before it happened and it's his birthday and he's finally smiling on his birthday and you don't even remember what you were reminding yourself because, woah, his eyes are green and he sort of has the cream filling all over the tip of his nose and it's really cute.

"Yeah, uh huh. Me too, Huckleberry."

.

"Are you doing okay, Lucas?"

Sarah is looking at you from the seat next to you in the computer lab and you really hope it isn't painfully obvious that without Maya at school, you don't really know what to do with yourself.

"Yeah, of course." You wave your hand at her and scoff. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, we were supposed to start working on our history project twenty minutes ago, but you're on a Google search page for miracle flu remedies." You notice that your monitor is indeed on that screen which is weird because you don't even really remember searching it. "Where's Maya, anyways? Doesn't she normally sit on your other side and make sure you work?"

"She does not make sure I work. I have perfect worth ethics- but if you must know, she's at home helping take care of her brother. He has the flu and she didn't want my dad to get it since he's just getting over that super bad cold that's been floating around and so she's keeping him at her house until it passes over a bit more. She's so sweet, isn't she? I should text her that because she could probably use a little pick-me-up." You reach for your phone, but Sarah's giggling stops you. "What?"

"Oh nothing... It's just that you have quite the crush growing on her, Friar."

"Pfft. Crush. Don't be crazy." That is probably crazy. A crush on Maya is totally probably crazy because that's your best friend and you just love her a lot obviously. "She's my best friend."

She shrugs in response and types a bit into the computer in front of her. "Well, I like to check on Billy when he's at home, and we're going on our third date this Saturday."

"Well, me and Maya Papaya are not you and Billy." It's a solid defense.

"Yeah, you and Maya Papaya are probably closer." She's teasing, and you know she is, but hearing the nickname from her lips sounds wrong and it makes you feel almost angry. No one else calls her Maya Papaya besides you and Will and you like it that way. It's special any other way. You just sort of roll your eyes in response and push her shoulder before you start searching the type of soldiers that were in play during the sixteenth century.

"Yeah, okay, whatever. Do your work." She's probably just going crazy. That's a totally reasonable explanation. She's totally crazy because you have great work skills and no crush whatsoever on your best friend and speaking of your best friend, you need to text her. Sarah starts talking again but you sort of zone out to pull out your phone.

Will you ever return from from the war to me? How's the kid?_

****You're such a dork. He's doing a lot better. I have him on the nebulizer right now for his cough and I got his fever back down to 100. I'm thinking one more day in bed and he should be as good as new. ****

I'm glad he's doing better. I need you here so that you can be a buffer between me and Sarah._

****I'm sure you'll live. How would you feel about coming over after school and having a bad reality TV marathon? It feels weird not spending the day with you.****

I'll walk over as soon as school lets out?

****Alright, now get back to work. I'm pretty sure you should be researching for Mrs. B's class right now. ****

Okay. So maybe your work ethics are minorly flawed, but that doesn't mean anything. Sarah's still crazy and you're ready to bash your head into the wall because there's still half an hour left of this class and you have to research soldiers from forever ago.

I am researching. Go worry about Will. I'll see you guys soon.

You're tempted to send her a standard 'I love you', but Sarah's teasing makes you feel awkward before you do.

What if she doesn't want to hear it?

What if she thinks you mean you're in love with her?

You're not in love with her. You can't be in love with her, you don't even have a crush on her.

Maybe you should stop saying it altogether?

Or maybe you should see if she sends it first and if she does then you should send it back? Or you could stop thinking about it and just send her it?

Your phone buzzes in your lap and it's now definitely that you will send it if she sends it first, which she probably won't even do, right? Why would she? She probably won't just tell you that she loves you over and over again. She's this really cool, super pretty, way more awesome than you'll ever be teenager that you can't even reason as being best friends with dorky you and your baby freckles and awkwardly changing body. She might not even like telling you that she loves you when she does.

****Okay, have a good day! Love you xx ****

(Or she's this really cool, super pretty, way more awesome than you'll ever be teenager that does love you and even so much so that she does it with- not one- but two x's, and you've never been more relieved.)

****_8th Grade_****

Okay, so Maya is really into musical theater.

You only repeat this once but the emphasis is ungodly because she told you last week that if she were to be shot and killed on the corner of the Broadway Theater that she would thank her killer with the words of Eponine's last breaths in her death scene of Les Mis (respectively in the style of none other than Broadway's best Eponine, Lea Salonga, who she acknowledges as the only Eponine besides Samantha Barks on the film). It's a bit much and it makes you laugh because your best friend is a dork; such a dork that when her grandparents decide to take her to New York for her fourteenth birthday, you and her bubbe plan to surprise her by buying tickets

for you to take her to see the Cinderella revival during your stay. (One of her most desired shows and the first of four that you will see during your trip.)

Will is with your dad who called you four times after only an hour and a half in the city and you carried the tickets in your back pocket that got mailed to you last week and you were really excited to see her so excited because all she talks about is Laura Osnes's limited year as the star and how she watched the Julie Andrews version constantly with Riley growing up and how she always wanted to play Ella because she knew the songs front and back. You even surprised her with the tickets on your walk up Broadway and she was so happy when you did that she started to actually cry on the sidewalk in New York in front of the giant poster of Laura Osnes and Santino Fontana dancing at the ball.

(It's a beautiful picture but it really has nothing on her.)

You had the plan to take her breath away and ultimately show off how cool you could be when trying. You sort of failed at coolly surprising her but it helped level the playing field of embarrassment a lot matched with her tears.

(Instead of smoothly doing so, you awkwardly shoved the tickets from your pocket into your air while announcing that while you guys are there, you might as well go in like a total loser, but she still cried so whatever.)

You just kind of assume the show was amazing but you're not exactly sure because you spent most of the time watching Maya's eyes light up and her bounce in her seat and sing along and it was so cute. She looked like a kid in a candy store and she turned to you after nearly every song and scene to make sure that you were as engrossed as she was.

You pretended to be but, honestly, if you were asked the evil stepsister's names at gunpoint, the result would most likely be your death- sans a monologue from Les Mis.

After the show, Maya is dancing on the sidewalk beside you and it's kind of amazing because she seriously seems like she's trained for it and then you remember that she was trained her entire childhood and she pushed for it because she's dreamt about Broadway her entire life. You even stayed and waited backstage and you got the stars to sign your playbook which was awesome, but now you guys are walking back towards the little loft her grandparents rented online for the week and she's singing to you.

"_Ten minutes ago, I saw you. I looked up when you came through the door_." She bows gracefully and reaches for your hand. You're tired, but you're fighting it because Maya is wide awake and beaming with joy. When you take reach her grasp, she tugs you close and you're dancing with her. "_My head started reeling, you gave me the feeling the room had no ceiling or floor._"

She has a gorgeous singing voice and you love moments when she sings to you because you're dumbfounded every time at your amazing best friend with her flawless voice and perfect smile and that look in her eyes because she's so damn happy.

"_Ten minutes ago, I met you. And we murmured our 'how do you do's. I wanted to ring out the bells and to fling out my arms and to sing out the news;_" She picks up the pace of your dance and you're dodging people on the street but no one seems to mind you two. "_I have found him, he's an angel, with the dust of the stars in his eyes. We are dancing, we are flying, and he's bringing me up to the skies._"

The words are reminding you of her and you'd sort of realized that you might have a crush on Maya weeks ago but it's not important because you don't want to ruin your friendship and stuff so you're just not going to do anything. Even though she sort of keeps you from breathing and she makes you so happy and she's the most beautiful girl you've ever known, you stop yourself and that's great except your self control is wavering as she serenades you with your bodies pressed against each other as a result of you repressing your emotions every other second of every other day.

"In the arms of my love, we're flying, over mountain and meadow and glen. And I like it so well that for all I can tell, I may never come down again." Her voice is getting softer and you gulp because wow she's close and wow her voice is nice and you spin her before she closes the space between you even than before and just looks at you with this tiny smile. "_I may never come down to Earth again_."

In your defense, you can't stop yourself from kissing her. You try and try but you can't stop yourself and it's just a little peck and it's the corner of her mouth but you hit her lips and it's the most amazing kiss in the entire universe and you are radiating joy because you just shared your first kiss with Maya in front of a pizza shop that sells two slices for a dollar and it couldn't have been more perfect. She only smiles wider and so that's a good sign, obviously, (unless it isn't and she just doesn't know what to do) but you don't know so you try to talk to fill the silence. "Iâ€| umâ€| Happy birthday, Maya Papaya."

Her hand stays tangled with yours and she puts it back at your sides. She starts to walk and her cheeks pink while she nods. "Right. Happy birthday to me."

.

The most offensive thing you're ever told in your entire life is by a theater student in Times Square during your trip to New York for your birthday. You had just raided the Disney Store and you were wearing a Cinderella crown and mumbling lyrics under your breath when a woman walked up to you and told you that you seem to be dressed in a tad too much black to be an appropriate Ella on Broadway.

You had to stop yourself from fighting her.

(Lucas had to stop you from fighting her.)

"She's right," you groan. You're hanging off the bed that Lucas is sitting on and your tiara has fallen to the floor. "I'll never play Ella."

"Oh, Shortstackâ€|" Lucas's voice sounds like he's smiling at you as you wait for your grandparents to get back with dinner. "You'd be a wonderful Ella."

"Nope," you interject, "I'm not princess material evidently." You swing your body up and you find that you're face to face with him. That's been happening a lot lately and he sorta kissed you last night which you're refusing to question because that'll lead to complications, you're sure.

"C'mon, you're totally a princess." Lucas leans towards the edge until he can touch the ground and picks up your tiara. You can't fight the tiny tugging of your lips as he places the accessory back on your head. "Even if you're not a princess to some lame girl in Times Square, you're always going to be my princess."

"Not even close. You're the one destined for royalty. You're like a prince." You want to laugh at how wrong he is. He's so brave and caring and courageous and thoughtful and regal and everything royalty represents. If you looked up the definition of an everyday prince, a picture of Lucas and his freakishly symmetrical face be in place.

"Well, I guess that would have to make you my princess then, huh? I get to decide, being prince and all." You're going to disagree but he presses a quick kiss beside your ear before he climbs off the bed and towards the door that your bubble is knocking on.

The more you sit with the feeling of his lips on your cheek, the more you begin to think that you could handle being that.

.

You're learning Hebrew for Maya, but it is totally not a big deal like Sarah is making it seem to be. She's teasing you because she thinks that it's because you're in love with Maya, which you're totally not; you're just spending Hanukkah with her and her family this year and they speak Hebrew during this time of the year and you want to be included. You want to make the effort to learn about her traditions and family like she does with you on Christmas.

Hanukkah is in about seven months and you've already learned the basics, you're just polishing before you start to learn prayers that are said, which you do have roughly two hundred and seventeen days for. Besides, Maya knows six languages, not including the Russian that she's in the process of learning, and if she can learn Hebrew, Spanish, German, Dutch, and French all on top of the English in her short span of fourteen years on the Earth, you can learn minimal Hebrew for her in a matter of weeks.

"Shalom." Hello. You know how to greet, the most important part of pretty much every language. That's good. "Ani loh mevinah." I don't understand. Another phrase you will use constantly in this language and one that will come in handy. "Shmi Lucas." My name is Lucas. So far, you can greet, introduce yourself, and you can tell whomever it concerns that you have absolutely no clue what they are saying. You totally have this.

"Yediat safa ahat eina maspika." Another thing you have is a situation involving a very, very fluent Maya who just walked in on you talking to yourself in your bedroom and told you a sentence that you have no chance of deciphering. "At medaberet 'ivrit?"

Is Hebrew hot? Like, you've never really considered it attractive and

you know that when Maya speaks in French it's like the stars are aligning to grace your ears with her voice, but this is a bit much. Should someone seriously get emotional about Hebrew? It's a very phlegmy language. Do you find phlegm hot? What is wrong with you?

"I, uhâ€¦Ani loh mevinah?" Solid.

God, did you just tell yourself solid?

Wait, but Maya's smiling again.

Yeah.

Solid.

.

In your home, you have trophies lining the walls of the room three doors down from your own on the other side of the corridor with your name etched gracefully into the plaques below the towering figurines. Sometimes you find yourself wandering around them; the tips of your finger gliding across the engravings. You watch each rise and fall like the effortless taps of your pads will cause an earthquake and you await complete and utter destruction to absorb the atmosphere around you.

It reminds you of your father's death.

He came to each of your recitals. Every performance he was placed in the fourth row, twenty-second from the aisle exactly in the hall you performed in- he made sure of it because he said it was the best seat in the house. He clapped as if you were Mozart with roses in his lap and Will's smile on his face. He danced with you after your classes and rehearsals like he could actually dance and if it wasn't for those late night runs from the dance studio to the frozen yogurt shop down that street to fill your stomach after a night of laughter and twirls, those trophies wouldn't be under your touch.

He called you his belle danseuse. _His beautiful dancer_, you think bitterly.

You miss him.

You can remember being just about five when Will was born. Your father told you that in the hospital, there was a creature being born that would terrorize the house. It would scream and cry and stink and throw things and when you told him that the monster in the hospital needed to be shown love to change, his eyes glistened with hope and he told you, "Mon belle danseuse, you are quite too lovely for this world. Don't let it change you."

He used to hold your hand when you walked down the street and he gave you extra cherries on sundaes and he melted chocolate onto your fruit when your mother wasn't home to scold him. He danced with you and he sang with you and he helped you choose the costumes you wore and the movies you watched and he raised you. Until the point of him leaving this world; he raised you.

And he left you.

You still miss him.

By the time you are seven, he is dead. Will is only crawling and your mother is still laughing and your father pulls a trigger to the gun pressed to his temple while you are at tap lessons and your brother is watching you on your mother's lap. (She used to come to each class back then.)

When your class is over, you are the first to run in and you race to your father's office like there is fire behind you but he doesn't seem to be there. You call out for him and you step closer and you see blood, so much blood. The next sight is a hand with a ring and then you finally can see him. You see him exposed and you see two envelopes on his desk with your name and Will's and you grab them and tuck them into your shirt before anyone else can have them.

You were just as selfish then as you are now.

Your mother calls him selfish, too. She tells you that you are just like him; selfish and disappointing. She tells you that she waits for the day that you leave her and Will because you're going to. It's in your blood. You are destined to abandon them because you are inconsiderate.

She stopped laughing after he died.

She misses him, too.

You think about how twisted you truly are when you see the envelopes sitting in your bookshelf between photo albums that no one has touched in years. When you pick yours up, you can appreciate the detail. In beautiful cursive is your name- it is taking up only enough space for your thumb to cover. When you flip it around, the back tells you to open the note when you need answers.

You don't find that you ever seek answers from him. You're not sure whether it's because you're scared he won't have them or if it's because you don't deserve the answers from him.

Maybe it's both.

You still miss him.

Will doesn't remember your father at all. When your touch reaches where his accomplishments should be, they're not there because your father wasn't there to support him. Your mother didn't go to many of his events or any lessons. She didn't sit on the side and smile back when he smiled at her. Your father didn't take Will to get a treat after a long night's work. He has a dresser packed with his trophies and medals in his bedroom because the room you're stepping around isn't supposed to be acknowledged anymore. You'd only found the key inside of your mother's old jewelry box two or three years ago- sometimes you forget how long.

When Will was six, you took him to a piano concert in your old town. It was for a performing arts school that travels the country to give shows and it was in the hall that you used to have recitals in. He loved it and he tells you afterwards that he can't wait to perform on stage for such a crowd one day. He smiles your father's smile and he

tells you that you picked the most perfect places to sit in the universe when you start getting him ready to go home. The ticket is tacked to his wall as soon as he makes it into his door that night, revealing his spot twenty-two in from the aisle and in the fourth row.

He always says that he was in the best seat in the house, and you think that Will might just miss him the most.

.

Maya's mom doesn't come to your eighth grade graduation. She's really upset about it, but she tries to hide it and she makes excuses for her.

"She's got better things to do than watch me walk across a stage for some irrelevant ceremony solely created for parents who won't see their children repeat this scene at the end of high school."

"Maya, she should've come. This is exciting. You're getting awards."

"They don't even matter. They don't mean anything. We're only children; they're worthless before high school."

"Maya, you're literally getting five certificates. One for each of our main classes and art."

"Colleges don't even consider looking to the records of class before the ninth grade, if that."

She's difficult and stubborn and she's getting frickin' awards. You kinda wanna punch her, but you don't. You wouldn't. You'd never intentionally hurt her.

You almost do, though, because you literally have to shove her into the classroom to line up for your graduation.

(Technically it's a promotion ceremony, but graduation sounds more grown up.)

You also drag her towards the gymnasium by her wrist because she's refusing to cross the stage six times today when it doesn't even matter. Today is pointless in history and you have a high school career to worry about, Lucas. You don't need to cross the stage, Lucas. It's not a big deal, Lucas._

Lucas, Lucas, Lucas.

You've never hated your name more.

She can probably tell because now she's dragging you towards the gym and smiling towards your dad who is sitting with Will, his camera in Maya's brothers grasp to snap pictures of your event. (He picked him up early so that he could see the ceremony.) You want to keep frowning at her grumpy view on the day, but you can't help but smile when you see how excited she is to see Will so proud of the both of you. It's a curse. A horrible curse that will haunt you until the day that you die and probably then some.

.

This one year, when you were nine, you thought that your mother came to your dance recital. It was the first one that she would've attended since your father had passed away and it remained the only one since that she would've attended throughout your dance career.

You didn't think you were supposed to see her there. Her face was hidden and she was tucked in the back, but she wore these bright red gloves, and they were the exact pair that your mother absolutely loved. They were some form of rare leather and the threading was pristine. You would sit with those gloves and count each stitch, wondering how many you would need to make your mother love you that much.

The answer was in the millions, if not billions. You'd need billions of stitches for your mother to spend time with you and you may be clumsy, but never clumsy enough.

Sometimes you wondered about death, too. How many stitches can you have before you're impossible to fix? How many slices and gashes need to cover you before the blood is drained beyond replaceable and your face is pale beyond recognition? You're fairly tiny and fair already, it wouldn't take much.

Sometimes you think that even if you have billions of stitches that she wouldn't spend time with you. You think of your recital and the red gloves that end up hugging Lucille and not you. They wrap around another little girl and you stand soundlessly on the stage as your friends receive flowers and chocolates and hugs and kisses.

You later pretended to fall off the stage- just to see what would happen- and you broke your arm in the process of slicing it open on this jagged dent in one of the stands for sheet music below you. When your dance instructor called your mother on the way to the hospital, she was told to leave you the bill and to drop you off at home when it is all taken care of. She had a meeting ten minutes later. She didn't have time for the hospital, time for you.

Sixteen stitches in your left forearm and she still didn't have time for you.

****_9th Grade_****

Maya often yells at you for the pictures that you take of her. In your defense, you were given a camera to capture the essence of art in this world and there is nothing that resembles the perfection of art rather than Maya Hart.

You like to take them when she takes you on walks around the park during sunset. There's something about dusk and the way it lights up her features that just gets to you and you have to capture it in a photo. It's so beautiful. She's so beautiful. (You need to look up more words to describe her because you're starting to think the word _beautiful_ way too much to be healthy.)

There's also the point that now that you've grown, she only really talks when you guys are alone and considering the serene path she insists on, she rambles on and on when you're on these walks. It's

not a typical conversation, either, it's always with big words and deep emotions and nostalgic memories seeping from inside to the open.

"My mother says that I'm not involved enough in school. I tried explaining to her that it's only two weeks into the year and nothing's going on yet, we're barely used to our schedules and the change going into high school, but she told me to stop talking back and that I should've joined a summer sport." Her shoulders are slumped and you can tell that she's spent days overthinking the comment already. Maya tends to blame herself for a lot, you've learned after years, and she thinks that she makes a lot more mistakes than she does.

"Shortstack, the summer sports are arranged for the upperclassmen."

You think that's the bigger word for older kids? You're not entirely sure, but you've been trying to upgrade your vocabulary these days.

(It turns out it is because Maya shrugs in response.)

"The freshman make it if they're good enough. She told me that I was like him again. She said that I didn't do anything but think of myself."

You don't like her mom very much. It's hard for you to imagine having a mom who isn't how yours was. You're used to mothers being kind and supportive. Your mother never called you selfish or ungrateful. She told you that you were wonderful and that she was proud of you and that you were going to do such great things, it was almost unbelievable. Maya never hears that from her mom.

"Well, do you want to get more involved?" If she wanted to do something, you'd do it with her. She shakes her head, though. "Well, then you don't have to, Maya Papaya."

"You don't understand. I do have to." She really doesn't. She's just bringing more to her plate every day and trying to please everyone besides herself. "I really need to try harder. Maybe if I join something she will come around more to see me in it, and she'll see Will in his stuff, too."

Of course, she's thinking of Will. You know that as soon as his name is said that there is no convincing her otherwise. "Well, then we can start looking for things to do on Monday."

She looks at you pretty confused and it makes you smile.
"We?"

"Well, you're not the only one with that blind faith or whatever, Hart."

.

In your school, photography students are required to have a camera, for obvious reasons. If they don't have their own, students are given cameras for loan and face good offers on those owned by the school for resale. They have Nokia cameras, Canon cameras, Kodak cameras,

Panasonic cameras; basically every type. They have every type of camera in several editions, too, and you know this because you sat with Lucas and you helped him pick out the camera sitting in his hands, facing you and shuttering while you glare straight into it.

The two of you went to an art museum today so that he could find some inspiration, yet all he's done since walking in is take pictures of you doing absolutely everything. You're surprised you didn't have to keep him from trailing you into the bathroom.

"Lucas, is there a reason that you can't put your camera down or turn it from me?" He rolls his eyes.

"Sorry, Shortstack, I'm actually only allowed to take pictures of you. I'm stuck on you. The button won't work unless you're in frame." He shrugs with this unapologetic expression that you cannot believe is actually making you smile a little bit. God, he is playing you and you're just taking it. You're just letting him.

Your New Year's resolution should've been to find your strength opposed Lucas Friar instead of putting aside money each week to send Will to that music camp he saw online.

"I didn't pay eighteen dollars for you to photograph me all day." Technically, you paid thirty, but he feels bad when you spend a lot on him so you had to lower it a bit in his mind so that Huckleberry would soundly come with you even after spending all his allowance money on memory cards for that damn camera.

"I didn't pay nothing to not capture your little scrunched pouty face when you're all grumpy," he teases before taking another picture. You reach out and physically push the lens towards a painting. It has a garden on it which is quite possibly the most stereotypical piece he could catch, but still. It's better than nothing.

"Take pictures of the art, Lucas. You are surrounded with works of art that we have permission to photograph for school, and you've gotten _nothing_."

He shakes his head and looks at you with a lopsided grin. You groan because he's frustrating and you can totally see that he's turning his body to face you with again. "That's exactly what I'm doing." Lucas snaps another picture and starts to turn to walk down the aisle of the exhibit. "You just happen to be my favorite work of art."

As he gets further and further, now actually taking photos of the walls covered in work, your legs follow and you get your own dopey smile to go with his.

You probably should just focus on that camp money because finding strength against him is a lost cause, you know it already.

.

Isaiah finally convinced his parents to let him go by Zay, and he announces it with this giant banner in homeroom.

("_I'm still gonna get a job even without using my full name in every academic scenario!_")

You wonder if Maya would mind if you started going by Luke, even though you wouldn't because she prefers Lucas (and Huckleberry and Sundance and Hopalong and Friar)- but she did join that plate painting class with you at the park district that you talked her into because she was whining about being bored (and she totally loved) so you don't know if it's entirely unrealistic. And there was that sock puppet making seminar that you took her to because you just thought it could be funny. And that informational meeting at the library about pescetarianism because she had been getting picky about her red meats. And there is that super awesome class next week on riding in the streets and the rules of the road for bikers that you learned about on that bike safety blog you follow that Maya totally needs because she rides her bike without the helmet constantly and it's dangerous. She really does a lot with you. Maybe you guys need new friends.

You consider it for a second but you don't really think you'd even want to not spend your time with her, though. So yeah, maybe not.

It isn't until now that you realize that Zay has been talking the past few minutes which makes you feel bad because you were thinking about Maya. You only really think about Maya.

Is that a problem? Do you have a problem?

Honestly, Maya could be considered a disability because your thoughts of her keep you from functioning in everyday life.

Do they give out social security for disability to those in love?

Except that's not you because you're not in love, you just have this stupid crush and you're way too young to know what love is. That's just ridiculous.

Except you could totally see why someone would be in love with Maya because she's the sweetest, most beautiful girl you've ever known in your entire life and she's so funny and witty and she's got such a cute laugh and wow.

Zay.

You're talking to Zay.

"But I don't know, Lucas. I'll probably text you later about it." He stands up, referring to something you have absolutely no clue about. "I have to run and meet Billy for study hall. I'll see ya." He gives you a smile and you return it until he's out the door and you can drop the weight of being the worst friend on this entire planet to your conscience. You slam your head into your folded arms on the table.

You're a terrible person.

"You okay, Huckleberry?"

You swear that Maya can sense when you think about her because she always appears when you do. Then again, she's always around. But you do always think of her.

It's complicated.

She's complicated.

"I'm perfectly fine, thank you very much."

"Lucas, you're talking into a table. You're obviously not perfectly fine." She shoves her arm over her mouth to mimic your muffled reply and it makes her snort obnoxiously. You'd actually question why you like her, but when you do that you get into that giant thing where you list everything that's great about her, and you don't think your mind can handle that right now.

You look up and she's still laughing and wow, she's a loser. Wow, her laugh is pretty. Wow, her smile is nice. Wow, wow, wow. Maya is just..._wow_.

"Well, spaz, I'm going to head to lunch. Join me when you're done playing hide and seek with yourself? I'll save you a seat." She moves closer and ruffles her hand through your hair before she quickly files your things back

into your backpack and takes it with her. "Just don't be too long so that we can get in line before the jocks and actually get food. If there's anything I've learned in our month here, it's that it is possible to hate high school boys more than middle school boys."

It kind of occurs to you that you're a high school boy, and you don't know how to take that. You didn't even notice that Maya has been noticing other high school boys, but now that she is, you start to tense up.

You stand and glance around, now noticing that, of course, there are only high school boys around you. Disgusting creatures, in your opinion.

Stupid high school boys now staring at stupid Maya and her stupid braided hair and her stupid smile she has when she notices that you're following and there's literally a football player right next to her but- wow.

You pick up your pace and reach her side just in time for her to start talking about the equation she solved in Honors Advanced Algebra. (Her sophomore class that juniors take when you can barely make it through Algebra 1.)

You have no clue what's really going on in your conversation or around you except that the football player is growing more and more distant, so you guess things could be worse.

.

Her name is Missy and she takes you on a date during the third month of your freshman year of high school. She has long, flowing hair and her eyes are a delightful brown that light up when she talks about Edgar Allen Poe poems and the works of Shakespeare. She is a junior to your underclass status, but she never wavers when introducing you to her friends and brushes them with unfazed responses when they joke about your age. You appreciate that the most about her, you

think.

You watch her sometimes when she's laying with you in the grass; she takes you on picnics. You watch her eyes play against the sun. They remind you of Lucas's when you go on walks and when he looks up to the trees.

They're beautiful.

The tips of your fingers reach out and tap her nose to tease, and her face scrunches. She has this crooked smile that you know you've seen and you wonder if this could be love- if she could be love. You surely want to love her.

"You're adorable." It slips from your mouth before you can help it and you look at her features wondering how it feels like you've loved them for a long time already. You feel like you've loved her for a lifetime, but you've only been dating for two months and you don't know much about her. You know her name and you know her favorite movie yet you don't know where she was born or what she fears. You don't know her middle name or if she has siblings or if she fights with her parents. You only really feel like you love her when you notice the little quirks that she possesses like her sparkling eyes and her cute little smirk and if you were in love with everyone you knew that had sparkling eyes and cute smirks then you'd be in love with Lucas, which you're not.

"Nope, that would be you, Buttercup." She also calls you these cute little pet names that would sound awful coming from anyone else.

She's cute.

You're lucky.

"No, no, that's you. Don't argue with me. I'm always right." You flash a grin and she hushes you with a kiss. You want to feel the jolt in your stomach that you felt when Lucas sloppily pecked your lips, but you don't.

She pulls back with a smile- God, her _smile_- and your chest aches as you widen your grin to match.

"I love you, Maya."

Missy is sweet. She is a sweet girl with a loving heart and a clean conscience. She takes you to fun concerts and she holds doors for you and she kisses you softly. You are lucky to be loved by her, and you want to love her back- you swear that you do.

Her mouth tugs upward to the right and it reminds you of the way that Lucas's pulls to the left. You hate that when you stare at it and focus on it enough, it's almost like he's telling you this. He tells you that he loves you a lot and your response is never forced. You don't try to make yourself feel that jolt with him. It's just there. He invented that jolt.

You purse your lips before nodding. You're picturing him, and it's not fair to Missy.

You're selfish.

Her crooked smile grows even as you choke out your response, "I love you, too."

.

"Can you believe that Will is a fifth grader already?"

Maya is standing in your living room with her hand on a picture frame. Your mouth tugs up as you step in behind her. In the photo, your mom is holding Will in her arms. Your dad is behind her with his grip hanging around you and Maya flashing your brightest grins. You all are standing in front of the fire station and there's paint all over everyone because you'd just painted the windows for the Fourth of July.

"I know, Maya Papaya. It's crazy." You wrap your arms around her from behind and you can feel her hands rest on yours. You try to ignore the warmth coursing through you and the smell of her shampoo. It's cherry and your weakness because you love cherry scented things. (Especially a cherry scented Maya, but you don't tell her that because that might be a little weird.) "Our little boy is growing up so fast."

You hope a joke will thin the air but you don't know why you make it because it's only thick around you.

She lets out a laugh that sounds like what you imagine Jesus opening up the pearly gates does and you love her. God, you love her.

"He really is." Maya turns under your arms and being this close to her face makes you dizzy. Your grip tightens but that backfires because she only gets closer. "Speaking of growing up fast, do you know what Saturday is?"

"The sixteenth?" It's a quick and accurate guess, but it's not the one she's looking for. You can tell by how she shakes her head.

"It's also two other things, spaz." What other things? It's probably some gross couple thing she has with Missy. What kind of name is Missy anyway? A pretty dumb one, obviously. It's probably their date night or something equally as gross and stupid.

"It's our four year friendship anniversary."

Oh. Right.

"And also it's that winter formal or whatever, but I was thinking that we could blow that off."

It's your first year of high school, Maya's first year in a relationship, and she's offering to blow off the big dance of the year with a formal date that she's actually dating to spend the day with you. She's giving up her first high school dance for you.

(But it's probably not totally for you.)

"What about Missy?" She's probably busy and so you're her second resort.

"I told her as soon as they told us the day of formal that I wasn't going to do anything with her on the sixteenth. It's our day, Lucas."

Or you're totally her first choice and Missy can take that because she'd rather spent the day with you. Not some dumb girl with a pretty face, but a dumb boy with an above average face, so ha- you think.

"I was thinking that we could stay home and build forts, like we did on our first sleepover. Or well, you did. But now that we've had some practice together I thought that I could maybe help you." She almost seems nervous and it's really cute and she's still super close to you which isn't intimidating at all if you try to forget about it. "If you want. I mean, we don't have to do that. It was only an idea. We could also go to that formal which is why I wanted to tell you in time to buy tickets, but we don't have to."

Does she want to go to the dance with you? Is that what she's getting at? Or does she want to stay home? Or both? Does she not care? Does she care too much? You need answers and you have more than enough questions that you need to ask if you could get them out.

"Together dance?"

Or that. You could say that.

She giggles a little and she nods a bit which eases your anxiety. She always does seem to relax you. She has some type of power. "Yes, together dance. If you wanted to go to the dance together then we could do that, but we don't have to. I mean, I'm sure you've already been asked by half the cheerleading squad."

You haven't, but that doesn't really matter because you wouldn't want to go with anyone but her.

"No, no, I want to go." You're pretty much choking out every word but she doesn't seem to notice which is great. "-with you, I mean! I want to go with you to the dance."

How great would that be? You get to spend a night dancing and smiling and holding hands with Maya, the most extraordinary girl ever.

Her face brightens up and she pulls away from you now which makes you want to frown.

The keyword is want because you can never really frown around her.

"Perfect! I'll get our tickets then!" She lets out this noise that kind of sounds like that weird excited thing she lets out when she watches her favorite Broadway star win a Tony and then turns around to keep looking at pictures.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Lucas's best color is this off blue sort of shade that kind of is a mix between navy and teal and he wears a tie entirely covered with it for your formal. His eyes look lighter in comparison and it's faded but also really deep and you've never really lacked adjectives before but you can't really describe it. It bothers you that you can't, but it'd bother you more if it wasn't so damn distracting. It's gorgeous, and it suits him well.

Your dress is the same color, but you don't think it's as nice on you as it is on him. You even went as far as getting your hair done at the little parlor downtown with crystals weaved into intricate braids and curls surrounding your face.

When his dad calls you down to take pictures, you beam at his figure at the bottom of the stairs. He's anxiously waiting with a little box holding a corsage in it with his mouth hanging open until his dad nudges his side.

>You guys look perfect together. You haven't even stepped beside him but you already know that you look perfect together.<p>

You're so glad that you're going with him tonight. Honestly, you can't really think of anyone else you'd want to spend the night with.

Well, you suppose Missy.

There's definitely Missy.

Of course there is. You love her.

(You think.)

When she says that she does you, you say it back immediately, but that isn't really fair don't care and it makes you feel selfish, selfish, _selfish_.

You wonder if you'd even know that word if it wasn't for your mother. If you'd scold yourself for certain joys; if you'd cry at night if it weren't for her. You can't blame her, though. It's not her fault.

"Oh, Shortstack, we don't need you getting into your head before we even leave." Lucas swoops down like an angel to save you from your thoughts and when his fingers slide between yours, you smile. Missy can never tell when you're upset like he can. He just knows you best, you suppose. Lucas presses a kiss to your temple and twirls your body around before calling his dad to take a picture.

He calls you enticing four times before you make it out the door because he's decided that he uses beautiful too often and his smile favors the left in the photos and his cheeks are flushed with excitement and his eyes scrunch when he laughs and you know tonight will be perfect.

When you imagined going to dances in high school as a child, your mind always dove to cliché's of tacky suits and cheap roses on your wrist and lame awkward poses with someone you barely even like. You didn't imagine the boy that you trust with all you have telling you sweet things in your ear, but you love it this way.

You love him.

There's no thinking or maybes.

.

Maya is quite possibly the only fearless person that you know. She jumps from high points and she wears whatever she wants and you're thinking about this because she is currently holding a spider to her face and walking across your bedroom.

"Hey, my little love," she smiles to the terrifying little pest in her palm, "I just need to take you right out that window. The mister is a little wimpy, I'm afraid." You whip your pillow at her and she laughs. She may be fearless, but she's also kind of annoying.

The spider moves in her grasp and you can see it which is gross. Spiders are the most gruesome creatures to ever exist in this galaxy and Maya is talking to this thing like it's a goddamn baby. She's so fucking weird.

"Aren't you a pretty color?" She opens your window with one hand while the other holds her new friend. Her voice lowers like she thinks that you won't be able to hear her. "You sort of remind me of said certain mister and that mess of hair on his head, little man, but I don't think he'd let me close enough to compare."

Your mouth pulls up because you can hear her and you go back to thinking about how fearless she is. Maya never backs down from anyone. She never lets anyone tell her what to do or how to do it. For someone who's only like five foot two-if that- she seems so much bigger and older and smarter and wiser than the rest of your friends. You admire her for it; for how finely she carries herself. You admire how she fights for what she loves and you're so glad that it includes you. You look up to her while simultaneously looking down at her.

She's truly pulchritudinous.

(The whole mission of not using beautiful you'd taken on is actually close to impossible, and you're very thankful for at times like these.)

"It's alright, you're safe now, Robin."

"I am not Robin, Maya. I am Batman." You've had this argument before. You refuse to be the sidekick. When you were younger and you played heroes with your friend Andrew, he never let you be a hero so you made your own super costume and used your powers of wooden spoons for hands to slap him until his lip and nose were bleeding and his parents made him stop playing with you. She totally knows about it, too. You told her about it the last time she made fruit salad with the very same spoons.

Her look spreads to your bed and pauses towards your pillows.
"There's a spider on your bed."

You know that she's lying. You know that she's messing with you. That doesn't stop the phantom crawling all over your arms. The feeling of

legs cover your own and you last about twenty seconds before you kick your blankets in a panic and slam your back against your headboard trying to escape. Maya's cackle pulls the terror from you as she plops herself next to you and resumes the book she started earlier.

So, okay, she's really sort of annoying.

Maya looks to you and possesses a look of pseudo-enthusiasm. "Holy arachnids, Batman! That little bugger there sure scared the jeebies out of you! How shall we continue our crime fighting adventures with you pressed up against this bed?" You glare at her but she goes back to her book with a cocky little smirk that you kinda wanna kiss off of her, but that's not the point... If there even is a point.

"I'm sure the city feels safe in your hands, so long as there's only two and not eight."

There is a point. She's definitely annoying.

"You are an asshole, did you know that?" She doesn't even look up from the page she's on when she bashfully swats at you. "I can't believe I had the nerve to think of you as fearless."

Maya has many laughs, and your least favorite is the bitter chuckle she gets right before she makes a mean comment towards herself; the one she has right now. "You think I'm fearless? Do you know me at all?"

She doesn't think enough of herself. You haven't known her to think of her worth as much more than a brick sitting beside a road since you became friends back in the day. She tries, but somehow her mind always falls short. "Yes," you say firmly, "I do know you, Maya." She searches your eyes for an answer to a question that you don't know before shaking her head a bit. "You are fearless. You're anxious and broody and annoying and kind of a dick, but you're fearless, no less."

"Oh, how sweet. Butter my biscuits and color me blush, Batman." Her hand slams to her chest dramatically.

You're right about this. If you're sure of anything, it is definitely Maya. "Nobody is as frustrating as you, either. Name one fear that you have, Shortstack. An actual fear."

"Oh, Huckleberry," she smiles softly, moving closer to you on the bed. She's staring at you like she knows a secret which is impossible because you guys don't have secrets. You tell each other everything. Well... besides that kissing stuff and the sorta wanting to really date her but that will pass and it's not important. You just need to have patience. "Always the clueless one, aren't ya?"

You're going to get offended but she's getting dangerously close and her hand is wandering over you and up your thigh- holy crap.

"W-Well..." Stuttering.

Smooth, Friar. Real smooth.

But you can recover from this.

"I just don't think you have very fears, Maya." You forgot to say 'many'. Very _many _fears, but you don't think she noticed.

Her fingers are pressed against the top of your thigh to balance herself as she rises to speak in your ear and you are seriously going to faint if she keeps this up because what the fuck.

"I fear losing you over most other things, Sundance.." You think that her hand is going to go up your shirt, but she trails it all the way to rest against your chest before kissing your cheek nonchalantly and rolling over to grab her book again.

"But don't shit yourself, Hopalong, I'll still kill all the scary bugs for you." You were probably going to if her hand didn't stop, but that's whatever. You're whatever. She's whatever.

Whatever, whatever, whatever.

.

Feathers are the most disgusting bits of fabric that you've ever known for your entire life. They're tacky and flamboyant and you, honest to a god you're not even sure of, think that one can not ruin their life more than when they plaster them across their wedding dress.

"She's joking." You're staring at the screen while Lexie's mother tells Carol that she wants feathers. "Oh, Huckleberry, please end me now because it would be less painful than watching this episode. Her mother is not _pushing _for feathers." You throw your head back to break from the unreal scene displayed. Can you boycott an episode of _Say Yes To The Dress: Atlanta_? Like, not the entire show, but only the episodes involving feathers? "How much do you have to hate your child to tell her you want feathers on her wedding dress? Tell me this."

Lucas's laugh eases your mind. He shakes head endearingly and interlocks your hands to squeeze yours in understanding. "I know, Maya Papaya. I know." He mumbles softly, his eyes not even fixated on the TV like they should be.

"Lucas, she wants_feathers_. On her _wedding dress. _**_Feathers_**. Are you even listening?! Why aren't you gagging?" Your hand loses his to grab a handful of popcorn. "I mean, that's a great costume accent for a production in a theater, but your wedding? Unbelievable!"

"Maya, speaking with your mouth full is very unladylike." Lucas pokes at your cheek with an exaggerated tone. "Shame on you."

Over the years, you've easily adjusted to being around him. You don't really watch your language when you're at his house or wear the most put together outfits. You can be abrasive and eat sloppy while you dance in pajamas and watch lame, cheesy movies together late at night. You don't have the responsibilities you normally do in your own home or the standards your mother usually forces on you, and it's refreshing to have an escape. You like it.

His dad is around all the time after taking work out of the picture because of his mom's death and, even though it's not the same, the house is still a safe haven for you and Will; Lucas and his dad are a safe haven.

You laugh as you begin to speak more obnoxiously. "Lucas, she wants-"

"Ew, Maya, what the fuck?! You just spit popcorn on my cheek." Your laughter grows as he grimaces and wipes at his face. "It's not funny. Your spit is all over me."

You're snickering now, but his look makes your face fall. He lunges at you and is soon licking at your face like some type of animal.

"Is it still funny? Hm?" He asks between swipes. You wish you could reply but you're impulsively scrunching up your face at the feeling and smell of Lucas's buttery spit covering your cheeks.

You're torn between leading the teasing on by agreeing and shoving him off in a disgusted effort when his lips hit the edge of your mouth and you both freeze. He's pressed entirely against you and he retracts his tongue while managing to create no further space between you.

You want to kiss him. It hits you rather abruptly, but you know that you want to kiss him. He's so close and he is smiling kind of dazed towards you and if you could just move a few centimeters closer then you'd be kissing Lucas.

Fuck, you want to kiss Lucas.

You really shouldn't because you have a girlfriend, and you are majorly committed to her.

But, in being so committed, what would the harm in kissing Lucas even be? Just a quick kiss. Nothing more. A super fast one that's practically nonexistent from how speedy it would be.

You're considering a small peck when he coughs and leans back.

You really want to kiss him.

>"Well, that certainly shut you up," he chuckles, shoving napkins in your direction.<p>

He's laughing and you're panicking because you really, really want to kiss your best friend. You want to kiss him and he's treating this like it is a game when it's not so you act impulsively.

And by acting impulsively, you totally just shove Lucas at full force off of his couch and onto the ground without even thinking twice.

>You know what you should do? You should really text Missy.<p>

You don't think that you've talked to her all day.

.

You tell Maya to break up with Missy, and she does it right

away.

You don't say it because you like her or anything, you swear. You tell her as her best friend giving honest advice. You just also happen to really like her, but that's minor in the grand scheme- irrelevant, even.

She told you that she doesn't love her, and Missy's so in love with her and she feels bad and selfish and it's only getting worse, which is terrible considering Maya's self deprecating thought pattern.

You bet that Missy doesn't even know her insecurities like this. She probably doesn't even get how she blames herself for too much and how she's way too good for this shitty world. She probably doesn't even know anything because she's an annoying, broody junior that doesn't deserve even Maya.

And, basically, she calls you and tells you this and you tell her not to lead her on. It's a decent response. You tell her that it'd probably be better for everyone if you break up. That's a solid piece of advice. It's credible.

You're credible.

And- bam- you have a super single best friend who's really pretty and you can now not feel super guilty for wanting to kiss because she does not have a girlfriend.

(You imagine that if '!' was an expression that it'd look like your smile right now, even if it only lasts the ten seconds it takes for Maya to sniffle and ask if she can come over.)

When she shows up, she is crying as soon as she walks in. You hold her for a few seconds and that's all it takes for the whole winning mindset you'd adopted to flee and your heart is twisting in all sorts of knots against her. She sobs to you about how she doesn't want Missy disappointed in her and how selfish she was for breaking up with her and what a terrible person she is.

You think that this is almost worse than being heartbroken over actually being in love because then at least she has her ex as reasoning. This is all Maya. This is entirely your little Shortstack worked up over her own mindset. It's the lies her mom fed her twisting around her to make her feel guilty and unloved.

It takes you forty-five minutes to untangle her train of thoughts. After you do, you guys have movies playing and she lays with her head on your chest, completely worn out and on the brink of sleep.

"I love you, Lucas Friar, more than you will ever know," she says softly and you wonder if more than you'll ever know is enough for everything you want with her.

****_10th Grade_****

Will is being incarcerated for possession of drugs. You get driven to the police station by Lucas's father and he is the last one remaining with the officer. Auggie has left, the young girls he was with are gone, and the young man who was dealing is in a holding cell. They tell you that they saw Will standing with the girls and Auggie when

the man walked over and the patrolling officer at the middle school brought them all in; he isn't in much trouble. It is a manner that can be dealt with at home and you sigh before your little brother runs into your arms and you embrace him.

When you hold Will, it reminds you of the years when your mother started leaving more and more. It was gradual, but steady. One weekend, five days, an entire week, two entire weeks; it built up and up until she was gone for several weeks at once. He would cry after she walked out the door and he'd tell you that he was afraid he would misbehave and she wouldn't want to come home at all anymore. He knows the chances of his fears as he stands in this station.

"It most certainly will, but where can I sign to take him home?" The man asks you your age and you're scared to tell him the truth, but you have to. You know that there is a slim chance that they're releasing Will to his fifteen year old sister, and that they can actually check so you're in a corner. "I'm fifteen, sir, going on sixteen. Innocent as a rose." You hope the joke will ease the rules, but he shakes his head in response.

"Sorry, but we need his legal guardian to sign for him before he can be released."

"But my mother isn't in town currently. I'm in charge of him."

"And when will your mother return."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

What do you tell him? How do you discreetly say that you have no fucking clue and you haven't seen your mother in two and a half weeks? "Very soon! And we're set to make a lunch before her arrival, meaning it'd be silly to keep him here all day."

Quick on your feet, if you have nothing else.

"I guess we'll just have to keep him here until tonight then. Feel free to sit with him, or to run back home by yourself and bring your mother here when she arrives." This man dismisses you by sitting at his desk and opening a folder.

Will is still crying in your arms when you feel Lucas pull him from you and softly whisper in your ear. You don't even remember him getting out of the car with you, but then again you barely remember getting in the car or anything after the phone call. "Maya, go call her," he tells you.

You know better than to try to work around the police. Lucas's father has always told you to run to the fire station or to call him in an emergency. Most police work is corrupt with selfish motives, he learned it first hand. He wanted you protected and he wanted you prepared.

You're terrified when you dial your mother because she hates when you call her on business trips. She tends to hate when you call her in general, honestly.

"Bonjour, ma fille!" she answers and you can tell she's with a group of people. She's in France, evidently, and she always answers in that

faux excited tone while at parties. "Excusez-moi," she tells her guests before you hear the background conversation dull.

"Bonjour, maman," you say in hopes that she isn't too upset with you.

"Maya, you know better than to bother me while I am working. Can you no longer understand the simple instructions I leave you? Must I dumb them down for you?" Hope is a silly thing to have, you think.

"I'm sorry, mother, it's just that--"

"It's just that you can't stand on your own for the limited times I am away to provide for you, isn't it? How do you plan on surviving as an adult?"

When she says this it makes you think of the times that you don't plan on surviving and that scares you. The inevitable plan of not planning ahead you face scares you.

"Mother, I don't have another choice. I'm sorry." You can't cry. This isn't about you, it's about Will. Don't make it about yourself.

"And here comes the dramatic episode. What is it you need?" She sounds angry. You almost don't want to tell her but your eyes meet the sight of Will crying into Lucas's chest and you know you have to.

"Mother, Will is in trouble. We need you home immediately." She lets out a long sigh and it burns the air filtering through your lungs. "He's in trouble with the police and they refuse to let me take him home myself."

"The police? I trust you to be responsible, and you've managed to land your baby brother in _jail_?"

"I wasn't with him--"

"Of course, you weren't. Can you do anything right? Now I'll need to leave this dinner to find a plane for a ride to pick you up because you can't focus on your younger brother long enough to keep track of him."

You really should've been there. You should've known where he was. He told you that he was hanging out with Auggie, and you allowed it without second thought. You told him that you expected them both at noon for lunch and not to stray too far in the town if they spend the day out.

"I'm sorry, maman, I was distracted--"

"Of course you were! With that no good boy that consumes all of your time and energy, I assume. I hope he was worth your little brother's incident, Maya."

You don't like it very much when your mother speaks your name. It sounds like she's spitting it because she's forced to. It sounds like it is dirty when she addresses you. She makes you sound like you are filthy. Like you are tainted. Like you are a mistake.

You remember before your father's death when she spent time with you; asked you to run errands with her, to see plays with her, eat dinner with her, almost anything. You were her baby girl as much as you were his and you were loved. You remember a time where you were loved and you hadn't done wrong. You were only a child who was not selfish or disappointing to both of your parents. You were a child who didn't realize the truths of this world, and you miss it.

"I will be there around six. Do me a favor and resist causing any more problems. I can't seem to leave you with anything. That gives you roughly eight hours to think about your actions and the consequences of them."

The line goes dead.

Your father once told you that you were a beautiful child with eyes of hope and fearless optimism. He told you that you, his belle danseuse, were what this world needed to go around. If you had faith, it would take you to your dreams.

All you've had is faith that you could take care of Will correctly. You believed that you could love and support him. You felt that you could keep him safe. You could remind him that he is loved and cherished and that he would always be protected with you. You had faith that you could do this and now you're looking at your crying little brother and you know deep inside that faith is quite possibly even a sillier thing to possess than hope.

.

Maya's mom is in town for two weeks. You thought that she'd be excited because her mom is almost never home, let alone for two entire weeks, but she barely talks and she doesn't leave her house for anything during the period. When you see her at school, she looks very sad and like she's dreading everything and it hurts you.

She even declines all your invitations to come to your place and so that decides it. You need to make your move.

You can't just let your best friend suffer through her rough patch alone, right? It's been almost two weeks and she's barely made any bad puns; you have to go to her house. There's no choice involved.

And so, on the thirteenth afternoon of her depression, you show up at the their household's front door at promptly three forty-five. Her mom answers and you smile wide because she very beautiful and she reminds you of Maya.

"Hello there, Ms. Hart" You anxiously start, "I was wondering if I could pop in and see Shortstack for a little bit?" It takes you all of two seconds to realize you used her nickname. "I mean, Maya, Ms. Hart." Was Ms. Hart disrespectful? She has a sour expression when you use it, so you think it might be. How do you talk to adults that are really formal? "Ma'am? For a little bit, _ma'am_?"

"Shortstack, hm?" Her mom gets this smile on her face that doesn't settle nicely with you and moves aside. Even at the tallest in your class at fifteen, her mother makes you feel as little as an ant. "Maya is in her room right now with her piano lessons. I'm sure

you're aware of where it is."

"Yes, ma'am! Thank you, ma'am!" You attempt a smile before walking in and rushing towards the large staircase that leads to the bedrooms. She must be different around kids because you've only really met her like twice and that was very brief at big gatherings. She's probably a lot better just one on one with Will and Maya.

You race to Maya's room and barge in but you wish you hadn't because the look on Maya's eyes is the most fearful you've ever seen her. Her hands slam against her keyboard when her entire body jumps, staring at you with wide eyes.

"Lucas? What are you doing here?" You've never heard her speak to you so harshly before. You don't like it. "My mother is here. You need to leave."

"I know she's here, Shortstack. She let me in!" You're sure that once she realizes that you were let in by her mom that it'll be totally fine. She'll calm down. "She told me I could see you."

Her face looks even more pale now and you're starting to get concerned. Maya has never really gotten into the details with her mom before besides her never being there and sometimes she calls Maya selfish and so you don't really know why she's freaking out. Her relationship with her mom can't be that bad, can it? You're aware that it's not the greatest but Maya hasn't really mentioned that her mom has said much to her lately and she didn't seem like it's been that bad. She'd definitely tell you if her mom was saying shitty things again, you think. Wouldn't she?

"Lucas, I really need to do my lessons. I don't have time for you to come and try to foolishly play around." She's straightening her back like she used to do at your house when you first became friends and you're trying to hide how much that upsets you. She looks so prim and proper and stiff and unhappy. You hate it.

"Oh...Well, then I can just sit with you. Maybe you could teach me a thing or two?" You plop yourself into the seat beside her before she can refuse. You've never really had any musical experience and Maya is so talented. It'd be fun to learn from her.

"Lucas..." You nudge her side a little and stick out your hands for her to help you like you're a little kid, even if you're easily twice her size. She gives you that smile that she gets when she's about to give in, and so you nudge her again. "I hate you."

She awkwardly places her hands over yours and your eyes watch in amazement as she immediately starts a melody. It reminds you of the night you danced on the sidewalks in New York.

You're playing- well, she's playing with your hands- a song that your heart is beating to when you fully kiss her for the first time.

Again, you totally can't help yourself when you do it. Her face is right there and she looks so beautiful when she's playing-

No, not beautiful.

Bewitching.

And then you turn to her to tell her how wonderful the song is and you expect her eyes to be focused on the keys, but they're not. They're looking at you and they're so bright and happy and there's nothing wrong in this world. She looks at you how the love feels in your heart and you lean down to connect your lips and it feels like the sun just exploded in the room because all you see and feel is light. You shut your eyes, but it doesn't make a difference because she's kissing you back and this is what love is. This is how love feels.

Holy shit, you love Maya.

You kiss and you kiss and all you want to know is this feeling. It's awkward and your back hurts from your twisted position and her hands are now only loosely over yours on the instrument slowly closing off one long clashing combination of notes that were slammed when you finally did it, but it's all you ever want to hear for as long as you live.

It's hard for you to believe that you've been waiting practically _years_ to kiss Maya, but it's been worth it. Fuck, the feeling of her against you when she let out that soft sigh at the contact of your lips will always be worth it.

Well, until you need to breathe, and then you guys pull away and her mouth sort of smirks.

"Well, Huckleberry, I take it that you have taken quite the liking to the art of keyboard playing, hm?"

You can only really smile at her in response, but she doesn't mind, sharing the reaction. She pulls your hands from her instrument to silence it before leaning in again to softly press her lips against yours.

"Wait," you manage out, pulling away. "You kissed me. You literally just kissed me. And that totally means you like me back." You jump up and point at her because you're not the only one who's been struggling with this fucking crush. It's also been Maya! She likes you! She kissed you! "I have proof, Maya," you boast. "My lips are evidence. You like me."

She starts laughing and begins to stand but you can't even see or hear her over her being a fucking nerd with a big ass crush on you. "You have a loser crush, you big fucking loser!"

"I'm the loser?" You're not sure why she has that tone or why she looks so amused, but she totally is because you never have anything to hold over her. She never talks about crushes or anything with you- she barely even talked about Missy. She even made fun of you for gawking at the cheerleaders' uniforms in the halls like one time forever ago, and you didn't hear the end of it for weeks and now- oh, boy- now do you have something to hold over her.

"Yes. You. With your big fat crush on me." She basically loves you probably and that's why she kissed you. She's totally been crushin' on you for a while now. "You're so lame with your big loser crush on me!"

"Lucas, you kissed me."

Oh.

Right.

"I was simply trying to teach you a song and you turned and kissed me, Friar."

And she doesn't have to bring your name in.

What an asshole.

"Wellâ€¦" You really shouldn't mumble, but it just happens, "I don't even care or whatever. It's not even like a situation or anythingâ€¦ It's like totally cool or chill or whatever because- psh. Whatever."

"I'm starting to think that you may be the one with a big loser crush..." She's smiling really slickly and it's making you want to step back because fuck, she's getting close. "You're the one who kissed me, Lucasâ€¦" Jesus Christ, she used your name. She said your name with that fucking smirk.

You're going to hell. You are cursing all of your impure thoughts as she invades your personal space and you're trying to picture the cross that's hanging in your living room, but you're definitely rotting in hell for all of eternity. "I'm just the one who enjoyed it."

"_Oh_."

"But it's about four and Mother will be expecting me down to review the lessons I've learned today. I wouldn't want to keep her waiting."

Okay, but who just says something like that and then walks out? You don't just do that. That's not a thing people are allowed to do. You should be furious, shouldn't you?

Well, you probably should be, but you just kind of watch her walk away and the way her legs move and her hips sway and her hair bounces and she's just so fucking perfect- holy fuck.

You can be mad at her tomorrow or something.

.

"Maya Papayaâ€¦"

Lucas is truly a mystery to you. You think that it may be why you like him so much; the mystery that he is. He's so impulsive and spontaneous. You love it, quite honestly. It compliments your tendency to overthink any move you make and to never act without a plan. He makes you better. He makes you a person that you're finally happy to be.

And it's not that you couldn't be that before because you know that you could make it on your own, but you'd never want to. He makes you

want to. You love being with him.

You love him.

It's weird to you, too, because Riley reminds you of Lucas nowadays. As you've grown, you've noticed that the few memories you have with Riley can parallel to ones you share with Lucas easily. Your best friend is staring at you with luminescent eyes laced with joy and optimism and faith and you hope that you never see them dim to mud like Riley's did. Her laugh was a stream of noises that could've been Lucas's raised a few pitches. You don't know when it changed but when you remember Riley now, it's not Lucas that you're comparing to her but her to Lucas and that comforts you. You're moving on.

It's been eight years and you're finally moving on.

It occurs to you that in the sense of moving on that you should really start addressing the darker thoughts that haunt the corners of your mind. You do try to brush them off;

You don't need stitches to be loved, do you? You've had them before. Your mother didn't mind you then, she wouldn't mind you now, right? You wonder if her minding would be for better or worse. You really wish that you didn't think like this. You don't want stitches. You don't want to hurt yourself. You don't want to think this way.

And your friends do enjoy you, don't they? Lucas does love you. Billy and Sarah do actually like your group activities. When you spend time with them, they do actually want to be there with you. They care about you. There's nothing forcing them to talk to you or be friends with you, but you don't know why that doesn't stop them. You don't deserve them. They're far too good for you and you probably take them for granted. You take everything for granted.

Your mind bounces back to the thought of stitches and it makes you itch. You scratch a bit at it, but it only burns now and you want to get it off; you want the pain to surface. You want the irritation to bubble through your skin and relieve you of the tension your body holds.

It makes you want to scream, but you don't even really feel like you deserve the air that you would use.

(You're not even entirely sure that you want the air that you would use anymore.)

.

On a Saturday night, Maya reveals to you that she thinks about death a lot. You kiss her softly because since that first kiss you guys do it a lot, but after you pull away she has tears in her eyes.

"Lucas, I'm scared."

For someone so fearless, you've seen her scared a lot lately. You want to help. You don't really know how, but you really want to, so you ask how to help and she shakes her head.

"Oh, Lucas..." You feel her fingertips brush your cheek. "You're such a huckleberry." She smiles at you and you don't like the smile that

it is. It's small, almost reminiscent. It makes you frown because you know that smile. You saw it on your mom when she began her turmoil, you saw it on your dad when he used to leave for odd hours at the firehouse, you see it on your grandparents when they're able to visit you only once or twice each year. It's a smile meant to accompany goodbyes. You're not saying goodbye to Maya, though. You don't even feel like you've really said hello. You guys haven't even discussed what to do about this feelings situation. You can't say goodbye to her yet.

You lean up and give her a peck to distract her. Her smile shifts to be lighter and so you kiss her again and again. They're tiny and excited and her expression is changing with each one so you just give her more.

You could kiss Maya for hours. You could write memoirs on how soft her lips are against yours. You use the word memoirs when you think about her and you think that explains what love is; Memoirs and kissing and gorgeous girls that you have no idea what you did to be so lucky to have in your life.

"It'll be alright, Maya Papaya," you tell her. You think of all she tells Will when he's upset. You think of how strong she is and how strong she always has to be for everyone. "You don't have to be happy."

She tries to shake her head and you can see the struggle in her eyes. She looks so scared. "Yes, I do, Lucas. I can't let Will see me like that. He looks up to me. I'm supposed to set an example. I've already fucked him up enough."

You try to tell her that she hasn't fucked him up. She's done the best that she could, and she shouldn't even have to do as much as she does. Will isn't her responsibility.

"Yes, he is. Lucas, last weekend I felt so...dead. I just laid in bed. I told him I was sick. I didn't want to get up." Maya's eyes are starting to water and her voice is getting smaller. "I just...I wanted to stay in bed forever. I didn't take him to the museum like I promised because I was lazy. He's missing out. He's couldn't even go out on Saturday because I was too lazy to take him and he can't go alone to the city. He's just a kid."

You've never seen Maya quite so terrified, and she seems almost innocent with all her worries bubbling to the surface. She's very pale and sad and she looks like those dolls that your aunt used to buy for hundreds of dollars in antique shops to give to your cousin. It never really occurs to you that Maya's only like five months older than you until moments like these.

You are both only sixteen right now. You're not going to be adults for years. You should be worrying about school and friends and dances, not ruining the lives of children that you shouldn't be accountable for. You should be worried about getting your licenses this year or the fact that colleges are already sending you mail or that you have acne or anything else appropriate. She shouldn't feel like this right now.

You think that the worst part of it all is that Maya looks so untouched when she cries that it's almost tragically beautiful.

She's almost tragically beautiful. You wish that the tragedy wasn't mixed into it all.

"Maya.. _you're_ just a kid."

She cries harder now because she doesn't believe it. She doesn't get to acknowledge it anymore.

You don't like seeing her like this. You feel like you need to tell someone, tell an adult, but you know that she'd protest if you bring it up.

"It's alright that you're scared, Maya Papaya." You kiss from her forehead to her nose and her cries dim to a snuffle. "I can be brave enough for the both of us for a little bit, okay? I will. I promise."

.

You are diagnosed at sixteen with manic depression, panic disorder, anxiety, and insomnia. Lucas tells your school guidance counselor that you struggle with your thoughts and they call a therapist from a nearby health center to assess you. Within weeks, they load you up on prescriptions and your mother spits on the ground in front to you when she tells you of your lack of worth. She throws your bag from the pharmacy on the ground and it rattles and cries, echoing through your vacant home to mock you.

She's angry at you for keeping her home. They called her from the airport to rush to the school for you and she's been forced with you since.

"I won't be able to work until tomorrow, Maya," she tells you now. "That's a month stuck here dealing with you. Do you have no care of others? Is it too much to ask you to disregard yourself and to spare the dramatics until I am not planned to be boarding a plane? Why can't you control yourself?"

You ask yourself that question a lot; Why can't you control yourself? Why can't you stop these thoughts? What's wrong with you?

"You disgust me."

You don't really realize that you're crying until you watch a box of tissues get tossed your way. You reach to pick them up but you flinch back because she steps towards you.

"I want you cleaned up by tonight when your brother gets home from his little friend's house. I'm leaving in an hour. I can't even stand to be held here by your lack of control. If an incident like this happens again, don't think that I won't struggle to send you off to live in a hospital where they'll have the proper care for you."

You don't want to go to the hospital. You can't go. "But what would happen to Will?"

"I'll have to find somewhere to send him as well. Let's hope it's not a boys' home because you're incapable of doing the little I ask of you, Maya."

Your breathing starts to get shallow at the thought of Will in a boys' home. He couldn't make it there. They wouldn't know that he rehearses piano at four fifteen every day or that he doesn't like white milk, only chocolate. They wouldn't know that in order to sleep, you have to kiss his right temple to give him good dreams and any other place doesn't work. Sure, he doesn't know that you still kiss the top of his head when he's asleep, but you do- and if you didn't then his bad dreams will come back. It's common sense, and it helps him feel safe when he's in your giant house that creaks with pain and distress.

"Get presentable." Your mother kicks the box into your feet before she leaves the room.

You're shaking really badly and you realize it after you take out your phone to text Lucas. He called you this morning to check up on you and make sure that you took your medicine and so his contact is already open.

You've been forgetting to a lot.

Well, you say that you forget a lot. Sometimes you just don't like the feeling accompanying taking pills to function in everyday life.

You start to calm down just thinking about him. You don't know exactly how healthy that is, but it's what you're clinging to.

You try to remind yourself that Lucas won't always be there for you. You really hope for it, but you know the truth.

You're pretty positive that you're in love with him, and that almost makes it worse. You've questioned a lot lately, but he hasn't been a topic at all. He's who you think about before you sleep and when you wake up. He's the colors in your rainbow, and when you drink tea, you think about his favorite flavors, even if he hates to admit that he likes it, and where and when you need to buy more of them so that you're always stocked up. You want to spend every day with him, even if that's not possible. You want to talk to him always and you want to be safe in his arms and you want to always feel as good as you feel when he smiles at you.

You want to date him, you've concluded. Just the idea of Lucas as your boyfriend completely wipes your mind of any negative thoughts that you fight.

It isn't healthy, though.

You can't ask him out. You can't form that mess. You can't drag him down with you. You love him too much for that. You love him too much to give him that burden. He's too good for you.

You can't ask him out.

You won't ask him out.

And as you lock the screen of your phone and set it down on the wood beneath your crumbling figure, you just really fucking wish that you could.

.

It always takes a few weeks for Maya to get back into her usual mindset after seeing her parent, so you're extremely relieved to find her joyful about two weeks following her mom's most recent departure to China. Maya's sent in this audition for a showcase to audition for an even bigger music audition thing or something (you try to listen, you really do), and it's apparently this giant deal because it's very exclusive and it's what she's been training her entire life.

"My uncle got the email about it this morning because he instructs me online from Europe, and we were terrified I wouldn't get in because my audition wasn't perfect- at least, not in my eyes- but I did! It's the most well respected showcase in the _world_, Lucas, and I did it!" she beams, practically bouncing on your mattress beside you, "They've requested an audition from _me_! They travel to several countries seeking only the most qualified, and they requested _me_!"

You grab her hips to pull her against you, soft kisses being scattered along her collarbone as she laughs and shifts to straddle your waist. Her hand catches the bottom of your chin to tilt your head enough that she can leisurely connect your lips, languidly sharing the moment as the giddiness sizzles down to pure serenity.

"I'm so proud of you," you mumble against her, grinning at the soft hum she contently lets out while your hands trail her lower back beneath her shirt. She bites her lip before giving you a quick peck and climbing off you.

"Let's go get ice cream! You can even order yours and pretend I won't eat half of it," she offers, already knowing the answer as she grabs her sweater from the edge of your comforter.

"How considerate," you praise sarcastically, snatching your wallet from your bedside table and getting up to follow her.

"Aw, Huckleberry," she calls adoringly, "How'd you know it was gonna be your treat? Such a gentleman."

You roll your eyes and toss the shoes that she kicked off beside your bed her way, only hearing about two of the fifteen words she rattles out about a race before she's already out the door and running down your stairs.

_11th Grade _

You often wonder if life could get any better than how it is now. You constantly strive for greater things but at the end of the day, you just know that it couldn't. This is the best that life will ever be.

Of course, there are certain moments that come out better than others like that time you got two prizes in your Cracker Jack box when your zayde took you to that baseball game that you caught that foul ball at with your father and Will or maybe- just possibly- the fact that you've just read the letter informing you that you've been invited to participate in the most prestigious showcase in the country where scouts from the best music programs around the world will watch your

every move and note.

Lucas is just kind of like icing on the cake that is the letter paving the path to your future career in the musical arts-no, your future career as the pride of your mother's life. She has been pushing that audition for weeks.

You have to call her. She'll be so happy with you.

You dial her number after checking the clock because you know better than to call her in Beijing when it's time for her to be at an event. It's about eleven so she should be leaving for lunch in almost an hour, more than enough time to break the news.

"Bonjour, maman!" You sound too excited. She'll be annoyed with you.

"Oh, Maya, it is far too early for such a chipper attitude. What has gotten into you?"

"I apologize, but, Maman, I got into the showcase."

She's silent for a second and that scares you. She told you when entering that she has not dedicated years into training you for a waste. You need to take your lessons as precious gifts, and you do. You take them as gold because they got you exactly where you belong.

"My shining girl, I knew that you would."

Your mother's words make you smile so wide and you grow so happy that your heart sinks because it's so full. She's making your heart sink for the first time out of joy and you think that you'll never forget this moment.

"You will go and receive a scholarship, I am positive, and I will start arranging my meetings so that I can accompany my glittering diamond to the recipient benefit they hold after the showcase."

Your mother is proud of you. She's so proud of you. She wants to take you to the showcase as her prized child. Your eyes are welling with tears and you know you can't let her see you cry, but she will be gone soon enough and they will fall because this is your moment. After years and years of trying, you finally feel like you are worthy of the life that your mother has graced you with.

"I just hope that you will spend your time rehearsing instead of messing off with that boy that seems so fond of you. We don't need any distractions before your big night."

"Oh, but, maman, he won't distract me. He never has before."

"Oh, Maya." That was the wrong thing to say. Her usual tone succumbs to the destruction of your facade of confidence. "You know better than to undermine me." You do know better. You know so much better. "I expect your practice to become more frequent. I want all extra hours dedicated to rehearsing." You agree and she lets out a long sigh. "Honestly, I wish that we would be allowed to have a nice moment without your mouth poisoning it, Maya. I will speak to you shortly to check on your progress."

You wince when you hear the dead tone from her end. You hope that when remembering this moment in the future, you can forget your mistakes within it.

.

Since getting into the big concert of all the fancy schools or whatever, Maya hasn't spent a lot of time with you and you don't really like it. You try to hide it because you don't want to seem all needy and clingy and obsessed, but you miss her. You went from constant affection to barely a kiss good morning, and you miss her.

It's not like you're crazy and you want to her to dedicate all her time to you, but you sort of do, and you really don't think that twenty four hours, seven days a week of spending her life with you is too much to ask after so many dedicated years of friendship.

You even execute said dedication by going to her house and checking on her to make sure that she's eating and showering and all things necessary to maintain a pulse whilst going hard on this piano thing. The fact that your motive is also that it's her second week of not coming over at all is purely excess information.

When you walk through her front door, you can hear the familiar air of graceful notes on a classic instrument and you immediately know where she is, not even bothering to reach for your phone to question her countless rooms. You didn't tell her that you were coming over, but you know that she won't mind. She never did before, so you can't find her having an issue now.

You even go to her kitchen and make her a cup of tea before you're finding your way up the stairs and down the hall to the room holding her grand piano, one usually closed off for special occasions.

You stop to knock on the door when you approach, letting out a little, "Hello, stranger," to pull her from her trance. She doesn't entirely look too thrilled to see you, but you try to brush it off.

"Lucas? What are you doing here?" You move closer and set the tea down on a napkin on the small desk beside her, moving her laptop with her compositions displayed to make room.

"I'm here to make sure that you're staying hydrated and getting the proper nutrients during this slave work you pressure yourself into." You're teasing, but she doesn't smile at it like normal.

"Lucas, this isn't slave work. If I don't prepare myself utilizing any time I have then I won't be able to perform, and I won't win this scholarship. This is necessary for my success."

You take this time to really look at her. She's wearing the same black dress that she wore to school, but it's wrinkled now with her knee socks at uneven lengths. Her hair is up from her the delicate curls she wore all day to a messy bun, a few stray strands slipping down to frame her face. She is twisted towards you and you don't think you've ever seen her quite this adorable. The glasses on her nose that she's using to read the music that she's written out are

kind of icing on the cake, and you sort of want to just scoop her up and tuck her into her bed for a long nap.

"Right." You tell her, "Working pretty much every hour that you're not in school or sleeping is not slave work at all, Maya. I've totally seen you have fun with your free time since finding out about that scholarship thing."

Maya glares at you and you nod towards the cup of tea you brought in. She probably hasn't had anything to drink since breakfast this morning because she's been skipping lunch in order to practice at school, too, and you can only even convince her into breakfast because you force her to sit and eat with you after you walk in together every morning. She has the advantage of having English down the hall from the music room and you can only run from Physics on the other side of the school so quickly before fifth period starts.

"Just take it, Maya Papaya. Drink. For my peace of mind."

She purses her lips and grabs the mug with both hands, her glare having little effect as her glasses slip down the slope of her nose. She tries to hide the smile at the warmth but you can practically see her melt with the first sip.

"I made chamomile. I know that it's your favorite relaxing tea." She nods a tiny bit, her entire posture shifting to rest against your arm when you take a seat. Her body is completely at ease by the time you're able to steal a kiss hello.

You tell her that she tastes like honey and she hums against your lips and tells you that you taste sweeter.

"I missed you, Huckleberry. Far more than you'll probably ever get me to admit."

"I can think of a few ways to make you admit it," you smirk, craning your neck to press a kiss towards her jaw.

"Do it. I dare you."

But you will say that this whole 'making sexual jokes towards each other' thing has gotten far more intense since you guys started making out pretty much all the time, and now she challenges you and makes you gulp so hard that you feel like those cartoon characters before they get hit with pianos.

(The piano in this case would probably be like Maya's shirtless body or her hand down your pants or something along those lines.)

"Well, maybe I will." You move closer to her to see if it'll make her back down.

She doesn't. "Maybe I want you to."

How does her voice even fucking get that smooth? How does she have that smirk while she's talking? It doesn't make sense. Her eyes are like three shades darker and her mouth is fucking moving. It's even more infuriating because Maya is awful at multitasking. Why is she even allowed to be talking and smirking and leaning in? You're the

guy. You're supposed to take the lead and get all dominate and talk low with dark eyes and a smooth voice.

What the _fuck_ is she doing to you?

"Your thoughts are awfully loud, Friar."

Well, now she's smirking and talking and leaning close and making fun of you with dark eyes and her smooth voice- and this is anarchy, honestly. It cannot not be illegal to do what she's doing. Well, in the sense of anarchy it can, but whatever. Technicalities in fucking history lessons that you should not be focused on while she's looking at you in a way that has all the blood in your body rushing south and apparently all your fucking courage, too.

You figure that what you say next has to be strategically planned. You need to talk low and smirk and lean and make fun of her even better than she's doing to you, which can't even be that hard, right? It's fucking Maya, for fuck's sake.

So first, you push your body forward. It's a bit jerky, but now you're basically breathing on her lips which has to count for something.

Next, you smirk, but you can't really see that one. You hope it's good, and you think it is because her eyes get a little wider and trail down to your lips while she sets her cup down absentmindedly.

All that's left is that you just need to make fun of her. You do that like all the time. It can't be that hard.

"Holy fucking shit, anarchy."

And then you get up and leave, waving and rushing towards the door from your very productive encounter with that fucking heathen of a girl you're in love with so that you can try to recover by the time you see her in the morning to go to school.

You can work out the kinks overnight, you hope.

.

You video chat with your uncle about a week before your showcase to show him the piece you have put together. He is one of the very best musicians in France, and he began working with you when you were only four and you visited the country with your father to see his family. You met him at his symphony that he composed and it was the most magical thing that you have ever seen. You received the most wonderful seats because you were family, and that night was the beginning to the rest of your life. The angels on the ceiling still line your dreams and the music continuously sings you to sleep and on the most bittersweet nights when you remember such a show, you can see your father smiling down at you when you tell him that you want to be up there one day. You ran up afterwards to tell your uncle, "Un beau spectacle!" _A beautiful show! _ He grinned at you and asked if you played any instruments yet. When you replied that you dreamed of playing piano, he suggested that he mentor you, start giving you lessons to get you on track. That began it all. That led you to this place. You practiced with him in France for a month before you had to

fly back to the States to begin school and he set up virtual lessons for you to learn from on your own that you use to this very day. You owe this all to him.

When you begin to play, your notes flow in darkened tones that leave an empty space to be filled with harmonies on the opposite end of the scale. When you wrote it, you thought of Lucas. He may be a distraction, but you don't necessarily want to consider that a bad thing.

"Merveilleux, my dear Maya!" He claps for you after you play your piece and you're so happy that he likes it. "It is absolutely beautiful." Aside from Lucas's dad, Oncle Mathieu has been as close to a father as you've had besides your own and you find that you love him more for that. "Your father would be absolutely beaming, sweet Maya. He always told me what a name you would make for yourself."

"Merci, oncle." You can help your smile and he tells you that he is going to try to make it to the showcase to see you, but if not then he will definitely be coming to the benefit with you and your mother. He makes a joke about how much fun he remembers your parents having with the champagne at those parties and he may need to do damage control. It makes you giggle even though you know that she is not the same woman that he remembers her to be. You know that he knows that, too, but pretending for a little bit makes everyone feel better, you suppose.

(Even if she tells you that pretending is for children.)

"How is everything at the house? How is Will doing? Do you have enough food and money? If not, I am positive I can send some over somehow. Your mother is where right now? China, I believe? Will she be back in time for Will's birthday? I know she didn't make it for yours." Having him care so much makes you grin. You look forward to his calls because you know that his nagging questions are of love and concern. You miss that feeling in your empty home sometimes.

"Oui, Beijing for a month. But we're okay. I'm not sure about his birthday, though. I think that I am taking him and his friends to laser tag or paintball or those weird boy things. Lucas will help, I'm sure." You're looking forward to it. He's going to be thirteen this year, which is crazy to you. He's grown up so quick. You're growing up, too. You turned sixteen only a few months ago. Before you know it, you're both going to be on your own. "But our food source is substantial, commander, and our money supply is full. Over."

And you may be sixteen, but you're working on the fact that you don't always have to embrace it.

He puts on a very serious face when responding, "Roger that, cadet. Phone back if any trouble arises." You hear your aunt in the background, calling him from his office to run to the market for her and get her some things to put together for dinner.

"Bonjour, Maya," she sings from the background.

"Bonjour, Tante Juliette," you respond politely and giggle at your uncle yelling to her that she has to speak officially now that we're getting into business. You can see her walk into frame and wave

towards you.

"Oh, my apologies," she gives sarcastically to him, "Bonjour, commander," she smiles to you, "I'll have to take this rookie off your hands for a bit. Over."

"Roger that, sergeant. Over."

"My love," your uncle pouts, "I'm the commander." She laughs loudly before offering you a sweet goodbye and telling him that she'll be at the door.

"The ol' ball and chain is taking me to the front line, cadet. We'll rendezvous back in a week after your show if I don't make it and go over the executed attack plan's success. Much love given from this end of battle. Favorite oncle, over and out."

"Right," you tell him with a smile on your lips, your fingers forming a salute, "Favorite niece, over and out."

.

You don't really think much about it when Maya falls on her way to your patio.

You make it your mission to have the day of Maya's showcase be the most relaxing of her life. She's spent the past few weeks slaving over her compositions and practicing hour upon hour upon hour. She's skipped your past three TLC marathons to rehearse. She needs a break before her big night.

And a break is exactly what she will get, too, because you invited her for Red Rover in your backyard with the boys and Sarah and Billy and even some of Maya's theater friends from the plays that she used to always be in before this project arose. (Red Rover, of course, only being her favorite game in the world which she would, thanks to you, be playing today with her favorite people and therefore making this day, according to everyone everyone involved, the perfect relaxation remedy for Maya.)

"C'mon, Maya Papaya! You love playing with us in the backyard! We've done it constantly since we turned like twelve and you learned what Red Rover was from that second grader." She's struggling in your grip and resisting moving any farther than the direction of her house a few blocks away.

"Lucas, I have to be ready in six hours. That's five and a half hours to practice, forty five minutes if I cut my shower short."

"Which you really shouldn't, it seems like you haven't showered in years."

You see her crack a grin before swatting at you and starting to pick up her feet. Finally.

"Shut up, Friar. I showered last night. I just have mousse in my hair and need to wash it out."

"Really? Could've fooled me." She sticks out her tongue at your joke.

"You're a jerk."

"I'm your jerk."

Maya smiles at that and it makes you want to ask her if you could be her jerk, label of boyfriend included, but you decided to save some excitement for another day just because you're slightly terrified she'll say no- but then she pulls on your arm to press a kiss to your lips and you think that maybe, just maybe, she does and you could have even a fraction of a chance with her.

"You're also slower than me!" She yells to your face before sprinting off. The more you think about it, it's not particularly mind blowing that you could have a shot with such a dork. And for someone so unbelievably brimming with grace, Maya has the awful tendency of being clumsy.

You're used to her falling around and stumbling. That's why it doesn't really cause for caution when she goes down in front of your eyes. She tumbles around a lot. She's probably fine.

Something that doesn't happen a lot, though, is a disgusting crunch when she does. There must be sticks under her. Or leaves. Something to make that noise, right? She probably messed up her clothes and that's why she gasped, too. She really hates getting so messy.

You pick up your pace to help her up, but when you reach for her hand she cries out- which has never happened before and you go completely stiff because you get a good glance at her injury. You can see that her wrist has obvious deformities and bruising and swelling, and you stutter out that you're going to get your dad because it's actually really disgusting and you're trying not to freak out because you know what to do. You need to stay calm and get your dad so that you can carry her to his car and he can get you guys to the emergency room.

"No, Lucas, you can't." She has tears in her eyes and she's shaking her head over and over. "You can't. I have to go tonight. You can't tell him. He will take me to the hospital. I don't have time."

It's a dumb recital. You get that it's important to her, but when it comes down to it, it's a dumb recital that does not take priority over an injury. She's being ridiculous and that's exactly what you tell her but then she starts getting angry, yelling at you that you don't understand- but you disregard her and rush towards your house to find your dad because Maya is hurt and you know exactly what you're supposed to do in this situation.

Stay calm. Find your dad. Get Maya to the hospital.

(Ignore your best friends cries in protest.)

.

You try to tell the doctors and nurses in the emergency room that you can't stay, you really do. You remind them over and over that you need to go, but once your breathing increased and the tears started, they injected you with a sedative and now your reminders are soft and hardly a whisper. You try to get louder but the screams are dulled

and they touch your good arm when they tell you that you're going to have to stay here for a few nights. They say that you that you'll need surgery to repair your wrist and that the surgeon is with another patient right now, but within the next two hours they'll be taking you out, your IV getting another dosage of whatever they're using to calm you down when your monitors show your rapid heart rate. You can't find the voice to explain that you need to go. You have a showcase that you should've been at five minutes ago. They will see you as difficult and non-punctual. They will see you as irresponsible and unworthy of the opportunities that they offer.

You suppose that you are quite irresponsible and unworthy.

"My dad is out in the hallway talking to the director of the showcase right now, Maya." You close your eyes and try to focus in on him being here with you because Lucas's voice is the only sedative you really need most of the time. Sure, the drugs coursing through you right now help, but you could go without any of them if you just have Lucas in your ear at all times. His arm touches your shoulder as he speaks lightly to your neck and for just a second, you indulge yourself enough to relax into it. "He's going to go pick up Will afterwards, so it'll just be us for a little bit."

You smile at the thought and you turn your head and nudge him for a kiss. He caves and it almost feels like you're in your own bed and not hooked up to a million machines in the emergency room right up until you lift your hand to wrap it to his neck and your entire body cringes and contorts in pain.

"Ow, shit!" Lucas jumps and brings his hand to his lip. He touches a bit of the blood bubbling to the surface before sucking his entire bottom lip between his teeth.

"Fuck, sorry." You could have more concern in your voice considering you just bit open your best friend's lip, but you think that he understands that you're a bit gone in this hospital bed.

"It's okay," Lucas tells you softly, "I think it's time for you to call your mom anyways. Get her updated on everything."

Before you can protest, he hands you your phone after dialing and you slowly bring it to your ear. You want to go back to kissing Lucas. You always want to go back to kissing Lucas.

"Maya? Why are you on the phone with me right now? You should be practicing off stage. You are scheduled to perform in less than ten minutes." She doesn't sound too mad when she talks, but you're afraid that it's just the calm.

"Maman, there's been an accident. I...I can't perform tonight."

Her sharp inhale pierces your wall of sedatives and it starts to crumble as she speaks again. "What do you mean you can't perform? I have not dedicated years of my life and thousands upon thousands of dollars for it all to go to waste. Are you not thankful for anything? For any of the sacrifices I've made for you?"

"No! I'm in the hospital, Maman. I fell. I injured my wrist, I need to go for surgery soon. I am grateful. I am."

No, you're not. You're obviously not. You're pleading for forgiveness you don't deserve. You should know better.

"You fell? Can you not do a simple thing such as walk, Maya? Do I have to follow you around with a net to catch you while you stumble around like an incompetent toddler?"

"No, Maman... You don't... I..."

"You what? Can you now not speak? Must I assist you in your words? You don't understand how to get around on your own? You don't understand the simple concept of being thankful for opportunities I've set for you? I've worked years for you to have the chances that you do and you waste them, Maya. All you are is a waste."

You know that it's true. You know that you've wasted this opportunity. You can't do a simple thing such a walk. You are incompetent. You are irresponsible and reckless. You don't think of anyone but yourself.

"You're selfish, Maya. Your father is dead and his only legacy to leave was your musical career. You've ruined it. You've destroyed it."

She tells you repeatedly how disappointed she is in you, and you know. You wish that you didn't, but you do. This was your chance. This was your only opportunity to prove yourself to your mother. She was going to surround you with support. She was willing to give you love. She was willing to be with you, to show you off.

"I should've known that you'd pull a stunt like this. I should've expected nothing less than a dramatic episode to avoid and unhinge the opportunities I grant you with. You're a disgrace, Maya."

You try to apologize, but she won't hear it.

"I don't want to hear your voice. I don't even want to think about you. You used to do this with your dance recitals and all it would do is inconvenience me. All you seem to do is inconvenience me."

You do inconvenience her. You shouldn't have called her. It's not a good time where she is. You should've told Lucas that you couldn't call her.

Fuck, Lucas.

Fuck, fuck, _fuck_.

You always make it a point not to speak to your mother around him. You wince because you'd avoided it for as long as you can remember so that he wouldn't leave you, he wouldn't see all your faults that your mother points out- but he's right there, and he could hear her yelling, and he knows.

Fuck, he knows.

You've lost your mother with this fuss, and soon you will lose Lucas.

When you turn to face him, he looks heartbroken. You can hear your

mother rambling on about your obvious pleas for attention in the back of your mind, but the main focus was easily on Lucas. Your main focus is always on Lucas.

You purse your lips and close your eyes, taking a second to try to even your breath before another nurse comes in to drug you some more.

You almost think you're dreaming when you feel Lucas's grab your free hand so gently that it feels like he's healed your break. He has never heard your mother scold you before this moment, and you honestly expect him to see the same as she does. You expect him to see some type of monster, undeserving of

everything you've ever had. You even look down at your battered wrist to see its discolor and suppose that this is what a monster should look like, at least you fit the part. You deserve it. You keep waiting for him to leave, but when you glance up, Lucas leans in close from beside your bed, pressing his lips to your temple and whispering words that you can't even make out, but it doesn't even matter.

Your phone is forgotten and the nurse walks in after hearing the monitors for your pulse increase again, but he is still there.

Even after all of that, he is still there.

.

You're sitting in your living room and watching the Broadway interpretation of Bonnie and Clyde with Maya when you decide to bring up the whole thing at the hospital.

After she hung up with her mom, you guys didn't really discuss it at all. She was fairly drugged up, so you kissed away her tears to the best of your ability and you kept her phone in your pocket in case her mom tried to call her back.

You'd never really known it was that bad. You don't really know what you would've done if you did, but you didn't, and you hate that you couldn't help her. It kind of makes sense, though, considering she's been home for about four days and her uncle is the only one that seems to care.

It pains you that she's so used to it, so normal that her mom is just refusing to acknowledge her struggle. You almost don't want to interrupt her to talk, either, while she's dramatically grabbing the air as she belts out the chorus of Dyin' Ain't So Bad- and she's really good at it. It still amazes you how talented she is even going on seven years of friendship.

"Maya.. I.." You don't really know how to approach it, so you try to spit it out. "I didn't know it was that bad."

Her expression drops before turning bitter, pausing the screen to face you. "What are you talking about? Bonnie and Clyde is arguably one of the best Broadway shows ever performed. The casting of Laura and Jeremy, though Jeremy being not the original lead, as one of the most iconic pairings ever known is iconic in itself with such gifted leads the and I feel personally victimized that you don't agree. It

represents a couple that deserves recognition and showcases Laura's obvious talent beautifully. It's funny and dramatic and so sweet at the right moments. The lighthearted feeling balances out the sinking ache of sad moments perfectly, and it's so hard to achieve that scale. The sets were great and the costumes were reflective of that time period wonderfully. That show was robbed of a longer Broadway career. I have spent so much time trying to teach you the magic of theater, but if you don't think that this is one of the greatest shows ever put to a stage, I don't know how I feel about being your best friend."

So, okay. It could've been worded better. Especially while she was so engrossed in one of her favorite numbers from the show. You should know, too. She's sung this soundtrack with just as much emotion as given on stage since it was released. You know how passionate she gets.

You quickly apologize and correct yourself by mentioning that you meant that comment about her mom. Her face sort of falls from the stern passion of theater to a solemn pout. You wonder if you should've stayed quiet.

"Oh."

"Well, I...I just didn't know that she was like that. I didn't mean to intrude or anything because I know that I can be a bit protective of you and stuff and I get nosy, but I was right there and she was so loud and I couldn't ignore it." You say all your words with one big huff of air and she sort of looks at you like a kicked puppy. You're not sure if you're the puppy or she's the puppy but there's definitely a puppy here and you should've just kept your mouth shut.

"It's not important, Lucas."

"But it is. It is important, Maya. I didn't know that she was that way. I just...I didn't know. I couldn't help because I didn't know."

You feel like you could've looked harder. You could've listened more carefully. You could've stuck around her house when her mom visited for a few more minutes.

It isn't until you look into her eyes that you realize she didn't want you to know. If she wanted you to worry, she would've told you, but she didn't.

You don't want to wonder why she didn't.

"It's alright... I'm just glad that you're not hating on one of the best shows ever created." She smirks and nods towards the TV screen to ease the tension. "I was planning how to end this friendship when I thought you were."

You roll your eyes because you know she wasn't, and you reach to grab her and slide her onto your lap, her head tucking easily into your neck as you hold her in silence for a few seconds. You feel her smile against your skin and you let out a quiet, "I love you."

She smiles against your pulse and she hums softly that she loves you

as well, but there's a heaviness when you say it that you don't think quite reaches her.

"No, Maya. I love you."

"I know, dumbass, I heard you the first time," she teases, pulling her head back to find your eyes.

"Maya," you tell her sincerely, "_I love you._"

She chuckles, shifting so that she can face you from a better position and grabbing your cheeks with her hands. "_I love you, too, Lucas."

You don't think you've ever heard your name spoken so ethereally in your entire life.

.

You don't really want to discuss your mother with Lucas. You understand that he wants to help and he understands how sensitive the subject it is, but sometimes it gets a bit excessive. He slips in little things about it between kisses in the middle of the night and he tells you that he doesn't believe her words when he holds you and he tells you that he loves you so much that you don't even know if you believe him anymore or if he's just speaking compulsively.

(It's the sloppy pecks to your shoulder at three in the morning that tell you that he's telling the truth.)

And just when you think it's easing up, he talks to you during a Friday TLC marathon about your mother and it makes you sigh because you do think that it's sweet, but you just want to watch the stick thin blonde from Sweden find her dream gown. He's interrupting a quality study session on accents in this international special.

"So, I've been thinking about your mom and how to approach it."

You pause the TV because you can tell an entire monologue is coming from beside you on the couch.

"And, you see, I was thinking that you need someone to protect you. A boyfriend of sorts."

You wonder briefly if this is Lucas's way of asking you out. You hope that it is. It seems awkward enough to be considering he still gets a bit flustered if you try to top him too quick, so it's not your craziest assumption.

"And, you see, I also came to the realization that you're also kind of an asshole sometimes- and a dork. That means that you're not gonna get a lot of good offers considering no one will want to put up with such a trainwreck."

You want to feel offended, but his rambling is very cute and it distracts you from the point of this speech.

"But, lucky for you, I have had close to seven years of Maya experience and I am graciously offering myself up as a boyfriend of sorts because I have built a tolerance to the uncool tendencies you

possess."

"Oh, how humble of you," you chuckle a bit, his smile making every woven insult melt away. You think about dating Lucas a lot. You never can really think of a way to bring it up, but you do want him to be your boyfriend. Making out and declarations of love can only go so far as friends. You want a label. You want to be taken. You want it to mean more than best friends when you walk in public holding Lucas's hand. And from what you're hoping is obvious, he does, too.

Your cheeks grow to ache from your smile while he speaks again.

"Yeah, so I was thinking that I would be your boyfriend. I'd be doing you a favor and you could repay me in that favor with being my girlfriend. Because I love you or whatever. It's like not a big deal." He looks down like he just asked you if you wanted fucking Chinese for dinner, and so you shrug nonchalantly.

"I guess."

He can't even hold himself back from pinning you to the couch, kissing you until there's no air left in your lungs and you're panting from the adrenaline.

"Oh!" His entire face lights up before he sits up and shoves his left hand in his back pocket. "And just in case you needed any convincing..."

You think that he has to be fucking kidding you with the ten dollar bill that he places neatly on your lap, patting it down with a dorky wink.

It's right then that you imagine the little fifth grader that bugged you to play with temptations of candy and freckles to count. You see the child with a worn out baseball cap he wore every day and whose parents took you and your brother in like you were their own. You see the little boy obsessed with making forts and his mother's mac and cheese, and you feel quite lucky that you've seen Lucas grow; you've seen every bit of the amazing man you knew he would be falling into place.

You love him. You truly do. You tell him just that, too, and he gets so excited that he convinces you he's going to leave a hickey above your collar in the shape of a heart.

You can't find it in you to object.

.

You feel like once you start officially dating, sleepovers become a tad bit more scandalous than they were before. It's hard for to you keep your hands off of Maya, let alone her clothes and your lips and anything else that wants contact because you're lucky enough to learn every tiny weakness she has that makes her fall apart under her touch, and you have the power to use that luck anywhere you are, at any time- but especially when she's lying beneath you on her bed and Will is off at Auggie's house with some video game that game out a few hours ago and she's begging you to touch her right where you

know that she loves to be touched and she's begging you to let her touch you which you would think would be harder because of the broken wrist and all, but, no, it's not because no other part of her is fucking broken and she makes sure you know that.

It's pure ecstasy hearing your name fall from her lips and the gasps she can't control escaping her when she's clinging on to you and your hand is tangled into her hair and when she rolls her hips because you're teasing and she wants to fucking kill you, it's great and if you had known that asking Maya out would result in sex like this, you would've done it ages ago- not that you're just with her for the sex, but holy shit, is it a bonus.

You don't know if you love it more during or after when she's entirely spent, her body curled against yours under the sheets as she peppers little kisses under your jaw and tells you that she loves you. Your fingertips counting the notches in her spine as both of you regain control of your breathing, and you just lay in silence, completely content with each other.

(You decide to call it even because you're not sure you'll ever really be able to choose.)

.

You want to marry Lucas someday.

You're watching him sit with Will, explaining his homework while you gather spices from your pantry to make dinner, and there's a small little grin tugging at your lips because you're so fucking in love, you want to scream sometimes.

You just stand there, sort of dazed with your head resting against the wall while you look at them, Lucas's proud encouragement when Will gets a problem right leading Will to try even harder because he looks up to him so fucking much. Will then ducks his head to start on another answer and Lucas's eyes meet yours, enough to mouth that he loves you and to see you mouth it back in return.

"Maya, stop being gross," Will grimaces, pretending to gag at your lovestruck deposition.

"Right, it's gross when I do it, but when you want to take Rose from your science class to the movies, I'm just supposed to let you-"

"Okay! Okay!" He says with wide eyes, throwing his hands in the air in defense as Huckleberry lets out a laugh. "Point taken, be as gross as you'd like."

You roll your eyes, turning your attention back to your kitchen. "You'd think that I'd be allowed to be as gross as I want considering not only that I'm injured," you wave your cast for emphasis, "But also that I make the food that keeps you alive at least five times daily when you eat a meal for two each time."

"Oh, ease up on him, Shortstack." Lucas ruffles his hair before laughing even louder at the weak shoves he gets from a chuckling Will. "He's a growing boy."

"Oh yeah, Sundance? And what's your excuse for eating all the food in my house?"

He shrugs shamelessly. "You eat all the food in mine."

You freeze for a second, biting your lip at how true his comeback was before concluding that this is not an argument worth winning. "Y'know what, you got me there, but when we have kids, you're doing the grocery shopping."

The mention of a family comes out before you even realize it and before you can take it back, he's got a dopey lopsided smile on his face as he watches you collect your remaining ingredients.

"Whatever you say, Hart, just as long as you know that you're on homework duty."

****_12th Grade_****

The first thing that you notice when Maya gets her cast off is that there are small bruises still left and she winces when she moves it.

"It'll still be a little sore for a little bit, especially after a surgery as extensive as the one we performed on you, Ms. Hart," the doctor tells her.

Of course, the next thing out of Maya's mouth is about when she'll be able to play the piano again. It's always about that fucking piano, and you wish she didn't love it so much so that you could push it over a bridge.

"We don't believe that you will ever be able to play at the same scale that you did before the fall, but with physical therapy, occupational therapy, and dedication, I believe that you will be able to make it back to an advanced level within the next couple years."

"Years?" The sound of the word leaving her lips makes your heart crack a little because it's laced with nothing less than tragedy and pure hopelessness.

"Yes. If everything we've placed to hold your bones and tissue in place does their job, we hope to recover two-thirds of the fine occupational skills that the skill level that you were at requires."

You hate that you know all she's hearing right now is that she'll never fully recover from this. She'll never be where she was before and she'll never be where she thinks she's supposed to be and she'll never truly completely recover in her eyes.

She slides her free hand into yours and you squeeze it, waiting for the doctor to leave before you go to wipe the tears you know are coming.

You really wish that she could be more open minded sometimes.

.

It comes to your attention that you've sort of sunk into a depression when your aunt calls and asks you what you've been up to lately.

"Nothing," you say, "I've been up to absolutely nothing lately."

You've barely eaten. You've been in the same clothes for at least three days. You've only showered once in the last week. You only get up for Will, though you've had him order in since last Tuesday and it's apparently already Friday.

God, You don't even know which day of the week it is anymore.

You remember your mother behaving this way after your father died. She fell into a pattern for about a month before she started working. She locked herself away because she couldn't face you or Will, and you wouldn't see her for days. You don't want to become that.

You can't become that.

That's exactly why when your Aunt Juliette offers to have you stay two weeks with her and your uncle, you really want to say yes. You know that you can't because you'd have to make arrangements for everything you're responsible for, and you'd have to talk to Lucas first because midterms are coming up and he might be too stressed with you gone, but you really want to say yes, and so you tell her that.

"You can take off school, considering you don't actually need to be there."

You forgot that they were the only ones to know about your qualifications for early graduation. You'd entirely forgotten, the letter shoved somewhere back behind old bills and Christmas cards from your family all around, and you distinctly remember tucking it there so that Lucas wouldn't find it because if he found out about it, he would've insisted that you graduate immediately instead of filling up your senior schedule with bullshit classes to walk the stage beside him.

You know that he wouldn't find doing it together as necessary as you do.

You tell her that you'll think about it, and you can hear her smile when she says that you just give her the word and she'll have a ticket waiting for you.

You're just not entirely sure how Lucas is going to react to all of this.

He'll be excited, won't he? He'll be insanely excited because he loves your uncle and you're spending a bunch of time with your family who you only see like once a year. It's nice. It's fun.

He'll definitely be excited.

.

You're definitely not excited.

Not only is Maya throwing this possible spontaneous vacation at you in the midst of midterm studying, but she also throws at you that she doesn't even need to be there for midterms because she had enough credits to graduate in spring of last year.

"I forgot about it, honestly," she tells you.

"How exactly do you forget about being able to graduate, Maya?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about it. I wanted to graduate with you, Lucas. Is that so bad?"

You don't know what's going on with her anymore. She's all distant and shut down, and you don't want to seem like you're attacking her or anything because she's extremely fucking sensitive lately, but you just want to understand why she's acting the way that she is.

"Yes, Maya, because you could be in college right now getting a better education rather than taking stuff you don't need because I'm holding you back."

"I don't want to be in college right now. You're not holding me back, Lucas, what the hell? All I want is to be in school with my boyfriend."

"That's ridiculous."

"It's ridiculous for me to want to graduate with you?"

"Yes! Are you not listening? Do you even listen when I talk?"

"No, Lucas. I don't. Ever. I've never listened to you."

"Yes, Maya, because sarcasm is the best response to choose right now."

"And the best option is to banter with you like children instead of handling this like adults, which we nearly are, while screaming at the top of my lungs until I turn red like you?"

The thing is that you're not adults yet. You're both teenagers for a few more weeks. Why is she even being like this?

"Yes, because you're not like this, Maya. You call me stupid names when we fight and you roll your eyes and pout! You don't talk to me like I'm a toddler."

She tells you that you're acting like a toddler and you feel like you're going to lose it. You just want this all to stop, but it's not, and you're getting angrier and angrier until you start to see the tears forming in her eyes and you realize that this probably isn't about graduating at all.

You open your arms, and within seconds, she's in them.

"I just don't want to be away from you, Lucas," she admits into your shirt, clutching to it tightly while she's trying to hold back her cries.

"I know, babe," you whisper into her hair, your hand running up and down her back to help even out her breathing. You know that she's going through a lot and you know that she's so overwhelmed, and so you just hold her, letting her calm down under your touch. "I don't want to be away from you, either."

.

"It's quite alright, Maya. Why don't you rest up for the day and we can pick up tomorrow with something less intricate? It's still fresh. We must have patience."

Your uncle's words give you little comfort as you stare at the piano in front of you. Agreeing quickly, you let out a deep sigh and he makes you promise to relax and head to bed, slipping in that the offer still stands for the vacation you didn't end up taking if you need an escape. You're just glad that you can still cross your fingers to hope that you won't go crazy, even if your wrist is pounding beneath your skin.

As soon as you hang up, you can see texts from Lucas. He's telling you that he doesn't like what this is doing to you. He doesn't like how closed off you're becoming again because you just talked about how you just want to be together. He doesn't understand where this is coming from.

You sometimes think he forgets that the little girl with only her books and her little brother keeping her going still lives within you as you toss your phone to the ground and focus on the ivory wedges beneath your fingertips.

A,B,C,D,E,F,G

They haven't changed. They've been the same since centuries before you. You've known them since you were able to recognize the alphabet. You can't wrap it around your mind why it's so difficult for you to play.

Well, you know why it's difficult.

It's just that doctors aren't always correct. You're perfectly capable of returning to the complexity you played at before.

Of course, you are!

...Aren't you?

Well, you have to be. Not being capable is not an option because you have to be. This was what you had. This was your chance to make it out of here, your chance to prove yourself.

The difference between 'is' and 'was' shouldn't exist because this still is your chance. This is your future. It has to be.

You try to play the melody your uncle told you before he hung up again. You close your eyes and you feel the vibrations, you feel the music coursing from your heart and you can do this, you truly-

Then you hit the wrong note and your hands crash down, it seems that your world does the same.

But you try again.

And again.

And again.

By the seventeenth time trying and trying and trying, there are tears in your eyes.

You are many things, but you are not a failure. Not anymore. You have proven yourself. You had your spot in the showcase. You practiced for months on nothing else. You listened. You had no distractions. You did everything that you were supposed to do. You can't be-no, you refuse to be a failure anymore. You refuse to let some injury define you.

You are refusing this fate.

You are refusing this life.

You must play and you must play well.

It's still fresh, you hear your uncle reminding you- but it's not fresh. Your cast has been off for months. You've been working your hand and wrist and building strength. You were in physical therapy for weeks to regain full motion.

This is no longer fresh and it's no longer an excuse.

It's not that you don't know what to hit -because you do- it's that it hurts when you do and your wrist spasms to completely throw your set off. Your bones ache and your muscles throb and if only you could reach your pinkie half an inch more to the right everything would be okay again, but you can't.

You scream at the top of your lungs with a force of pure anger for the first time in your life. It's a deafening screech that compliments the slam of your fists to the ivory in front of you.

Your mother doesn't even call you anymore. She only texts you, tells you that she'll be away longer. You fear that the next time you see her in person will be Will's high school graduation, and that's only for her own personal benefit. He tries to act like it doesn't bother him anymore, but you know that it does. He wants her home.

She stays away because of you. She's always stayed away because of you.

The difference between 'is' and 'was' is that one option leads to the hope of your family being whole again and the other is the fate you're left with because of your foolish behaviors and idiotic decisions. The difference is your mother coming home or staying away. The difference is you succeeding or failing.

You scream for how ungrateful you are.

You scream for how much you've inconvenienced her.

You scream for the nights Will has cried for her.

You scream over and over until your throat is raw and your vision blurred and you scream one last time for the difference between 'is' and 'was'.

.

It bothers you that you don't really see Maya anymore. With you needing to be in school and her not, she stays home a lot to practice her music. It's all she really seems to do, actually, but you're trying to be supportive.

Still, you can't help but wish she'd stop obsessing over her piano. You get that it was a big thing to her or whatever, but you don't like how she's shutting herself in again. She's not supposed to do that anymore. She's supposed to be more open minded and willing to accept her fate. She's supposed to be happier with you there.

You go to try and surprise her during your lunch one day by popping into her house, but she doesn't even notice you as you intrude. As you watch her from the doorway, it reminds you of the serenity that you felt watching her while you were younger. Every note is beautiful and every key that she hits makes any worry in your mind disappear, if only for that second.

You carefully watch her hands and they dance on the piano like she was never injured...until they don't and you see her twitch every so often or wince in pain. She doesn't stop, though.

It kills you that she doesn't stop.

"Maya Papaya," you call out hopefully, and she mutters a greeting before restarting her song. "Maya, you really should take a break." You notice her body go tense when you step forward to take her hands into yours. "Your hands are going to fall off if you don't let them rest every so often." You chuckle a little bit for your attempt of a joke, but she doesn't respond. She only stares down and shakes her head before taking her body back.

"I've almost got this," she tells you, letting out a breath as her fingers settle against her instrument.

"No, you really should take a break. I'm sure you've been here for hours." You're only trying to help. You can't see why she won't just turn around.

"I can't take a break, Lucas. I've almost got this." You reach for her hands again and she yanks them from you. "Leave me alone. I need to do this."

And you would leave her alone, but you know for a matter of fact that she doesn't need to do anything. Her showcase isn't a worry. Her mom hasn't been bothering her. There's absolutely nothing forcing her to sit here.

The doctors told her that she'd have some difficulty. She heard them. She's supposed to be accepting this and not dwelling on the past. She's only going to sit here and practice and be sad if you don't grab her, so you really don't see the problem with you reaching out

to help her stand up.

"Maya, come on. Just chill out, you can break for a few minutes. I don't even have that much more time to be here before I gotta get back." You checked your phone before walking into the room with only about half an hour of lunch to spare.

"No one asked you to be here," she snaps and it makes you roll your eyes because she is ridiculous.

"No one asked you to stop coming to school."

"As a matter of fact, Lucas, I do believe that you were the one who was mad at me because I still went to school with you."

"As a matter of fact, Maya, I do believe that you were the one who decided to hide the fact that you were able to graduate last year."

"I wasn't hiding anything."

"I'm just trying to help you."

"Well, no one asked you to help me."

"No one asked you to forget about your entire life to glue yourself to your fucking piano."

There are times in your life where everything zones out and it's just you and Maya. Often they're good, but there are always times every once in awhile that punch you in the gut and make you wish that you could reset everything wrong you've ever done so that there doesn't have to be pain in the mix.

(The moment that Maya stands up, looks you in the eyes, and says between gritted teeth, "No one asked you to stick your nose where it doesn't belong. No one asked you to come to my home uninvited to bother me. No one asked you to intrude in every single detail of my life. No one asked you to question my actions when they are absolutely no concern to you in any fucking way, Lucas. No one asked you to wake up one day and decide that you need to meddle and prod in my affairs. No one asked you to make yourself some hero that pulls me out of my home while I'm practicing and single-handedly destroy the only chance I have at a future in music." is one of those times.)

You really do want to argue with her, you swear, but she's not done. You know she's not because her body is shaking and she has tears in her eyes and she's laughing bitterly when she pushes your chest so you stumble back a few feet.

"Yet, here you are, Lucas. Here you are, meddling in everything. Here you are portraying yourself as some knight in shining armor that rescued me from a life of bitterness and melancholy. Is that all that I am to you? A project? Something to fix with your love? Tell me, Lucas, does it help you sleep better at night that you use me for some self esteem boost? This isn't a fucking fairytale. Your love isn't transforming me from a hideous beast to a gorgeous princess. I am not in distress. I do not live to make you feel better because you think that you're doing this world some type of justice by being in

my life."

The thing is that you actually thought you were changing her. You thought that everything had changed when you met that day when you were eleven. You thought that over the years, you helped her become better... didn't you? You did change her. That's how it was supposed to happen. You befriended her and loved her and changed her and you helped her realize that she's wonderful and she's beautiful and she doesn't have to be so strict all the time.

"Any changes that I've made in my life have been because of myself, so don't flatter yourself by getting off to the thought that without you, I'd cry myself to sleep every night." She breaks her eye contact when she tells you to leave. She pushes past you and tells you to lock the door on your way out, and you obey because you don't really know what else to do.

Everything that she said was right. You do think like that. You did think you were changing her. You did think that your love would stop her from being so introverted. You did think that you were changing the stars in the sky by helping her become more open to things.

You treated her like a project.

You thought she was something to fix, and you make it all the way passed your doorstep and into your bedroom before it occurs to you that Maya wasn't broken in the first place.

.

You're not talking to Lucas when your senior prom rolls around, and so you end up texting Missy to ask if she'd like to drag you there on her arm for old time's sake.

You still talk a lot since your breakup three years ago, and she's just as beautiful as she was back then so you're happy that she accepts.

You're extremely excited because it's a gross, cliché Starry Night theme and your dress is long and flowing and makes you feel unstoppable and you're going to have fun, even without Lucas there.

"Trouble in paradise?" Missy asks you, slipping her hand into yours as you walk into the planetarium that your year secured as the bomb ass prom venue, and you hate that you're not sharing this with Huckleberry- but you also hate him, so you call it even.

"That obvious?"

She shrugs, pulling you a little closer before picking up the conversation. "A little bit. I'm surprised you're not here with tall, tan, and absolutely in love with you."

You can't help but sigh. "I'm mad at Lucas right now," you huff.

"I got that much. What'd he do?"

You pause your conversation to grin at the photographer that your school hired with Missy on your arm before diving right back into

your bitter expression.

"He's annoying and intrusive and he makes me want to rip my hair out."

Missy chuckles at you, wasting no time to drag you towards the dance floor. "That's what you get for falling in love with a dumb boy."

"He is pretty dumb, isn't he?" you smirk, stopping near the edge of the crowd to softly sway in her arms, facing her fully to clasp your hands behind her neck. "Why can't you just let me enjoy my night with a beautiful girl? If you're good, I might even throw in a kiss or two."

She giggles and holds you even tighter, and you wish that you could've just fallen in love with Missy your freshman year.

.

You have a plan when you march over to Maya's house, exactly one week before your high school graduation- a brilliant plan with tons of steps and actions and things you're gonna do once you see her. The issue is that you completely forget everything about your plan when she opens the door because she's wearing that sweater that you left in her hamper forever ago and her hair is pulled back in a braid and you haven't really seen her face in a while, so you kind of just lunge forward and kiss her and hope that everything will turn out okay.

She tastes like Cinnamon Toast Crunch, but you don't want to question why she's eating breakfast at four in the afternoon, so you kiss her with all that you have because you can ask her about it tomorrow or next month or next lifetime- who cares?

When she pulls away, you brace yourself to be smacked because Maya's temper usually calls for that, but you're surprised to find her hands balled into the front of your shirt, yanking you into her home before the door slams shut and she steals the air from your lungs.

.

You and Lucas make up, and you're really excited when you text Missy to inform her that his wrongs were now rights and that the universe is balanced once again.

(You leave out the fact that you made up in basically every room on the main level of your house- twice on your kitchen counter- but minor details.)

"Maya Papaya," Lucas whispers beside you, your weight against him on your couch after making the full circle throughout your home, "I have a question for you."

You wonder what it could be because you can barely form coherent sentences right now, let alone ask questions, so you try to acknowledge his request but it comes out as an awkward cross between a hum and a moan.

"Actually, wait-" he cuts in, slowly lifting your protesting body to

sit you up on the couch so that he can stand. You reach out to grab his discarded shirt from the back of the lamp on your right, pulling it over you when he tugs out his wallet from the pocket of his jeans he'd left near the threshold of your kitchen and rushes back. "_Now_, I have a question."

You roll your eyes, hoping this is all worth him getting you up from your comfortable position on his chest. "Okay, out with it," you say impatiently, your bitter expression lifting when you see his nostalgic little smirk when he holds out a ten dollar bill.

_"__Do you love me?"_

End
file.